

## Taking care of you

*by Kaleen McNamara*



By the time we make it to a certain age and have been responsible for taking care of ourselves for years it may seem redundant to say it still needs to be done when you are caring for someone else. However, even though we should all know how to care for ourselves by now, caregiving can be so overwhelming we begin to neglect our own needs. Caregiving can increase our stress level and work load and this makes it harder to balance our own needs.

Studies show that those caring for an elderly loved one are at higher risk of fatal health problems than others of the same age. Caregivers have a higher frequency of depression, chronic illness, and a declining quality of life. A big part of this is that caregivers at every age are less likely to practice self-care and are more likely to have poor diets, too little sleep, too little exercise, too little rest when ill, and too few doctor visits when health issues arise. The good news is there is A LOT you can do by recognizing this fact and reclaiming responsibility for your own care.

Everyone's caregiving situation is slightly different and the emotional reasons behind self neglect can vary. It may even be a lifelong pattern, but you must remember that the person you are caring for will only be worse off if your health deteriorates. Start by identifying what in your own mind has been allowing you to neglect your own care. For instance, do you feel you have to earn the affection of the care recipient? Do you think that you are being selfish if you put your own needs first? Do you feel anxious when you think about your own needs? What is the fear really about? Do you feel inadequate if you have to ask for help? Often time negative self-talk justifies neglecting our own needs. For instance, telling yourself things like "I am solely responsible for my parent's health; if I don't do this no one will; I never do anything right; or I could never find to time exercise". Once we identify these we can replace them with the reverse such as, "I am really good at preparing

dad's dinner; I can find 15 minutes for a walk every day; I have people and resources around me for support; and I am not alone".

One of the first steps to take in order to protect your own health is to reduce your stress level. To do this, first you need to recognize the signs of stress. Signs can include irritability, feeling overwhelmed and tired, forgetfulness, problems sleeping (too much or too little), weight gain or loss, losing interest in usual pastimes and in socializing. Recognize your own symptoms and work to counteract them. What are your main sources of stress? Is it too much to do, a dispute with friends or family, financial worries, feeling inadequate, or some combination of these? Which ones are causing the most stress right now? Identify what you can and cannot change. Which ones do you have control over?

Once you identify areas where you can reduce stress, the next step is to take action. If you have identified that you simply have too much to do, your next step will be to find ways to take a break. Caregiving is a job and like any other job you need to take a break on a regular basis to avoid burn out. It is not selfish to expect a break from caregiving.

Planning a break can seem impossible so setting this as a goal is good, but it needs to be broken down further into actions. So first set some goals: take a break, ask for help, feel more healthy. Then set action steps to reach these goals. For example, sit down to read three times a week; ask John to cook dinner once a week; take three, 15-minute walks per week. Breaking the goals down into actions will make them seem a lot more achievable.

### **Some actions to help you take a break include the following:**

Make a list of all the tasks that could be done by someone else (not worrying about who would do it at this stage). Make a list of all the people who could be asked to help, or who have offered help. Try to match tasks you need done to the people you can ask as this will lessen the chance that they will say no. For instance, if John really likes to cook ask him to come over and make dinner for your mom. When asking for help make sure you don't down play how important it is. Be assertive. Instead of, "I was just wondering if you might consider looking after Dad on Sunday, while I am in church?" Try instead, "I would like to go to church on Sunday, could you watch Dad from 9am to 11am?" Next look into respite services near you. There are resources out there to help caregivers take a break by providing care on a regular basis. For a list of respite services on the North Shore contact the Seniors' One-Stop Information Line at 604-983-3303, or stop in for a brochure at our office (North Shore Community Resources, Capilano Mall). Tackle each of your goals, one at a time, and this will guide you to a more balanced and healthier life.