

Choosing to Take Charge of Your Life

People often become caregivers suddenly, without warning: a husband is diagnosed with cancer, a child is in a car accident; a parent has a stroke.

At other times, caregiving creeps up on you: You know mom is forgetting things, and you slowly start taking on some administrative tasks and calling more often, until one day you realize she no longer has the capacity to live safely on her own.

Regardless of how you became a family caregiver, it most likely included elements of surprise and emotionally demanding moments. In the “hubbub” that followed the moment of crisis, amidst the reorientation of your schedule, the search for resources, the fears about the future, and the day-to-day challenges, you probably never stopped to think about what happened. You probably didn’t devise a plan that takes into account the health and well-being of all concerned — including yourself. If you are like most people caring for an ill, aged or disabled loved one, you just went on automatic pilot and started to do, and do, and do.

Somewhere along the line, however, it is vitally important that you stop, take a breath, and try to gain some control over the situation, rather than letting the situation control you. Obviously you cannot control everything that happens to you or to your loved one. But even though you don’t have that power, you do have the power to make active choices about how you are going to deal with the caregiving circumstances of your life.

Keep a Positive Attitude

Perhaps the most important choice you have to make is how you are going to approach life from here on out. You can choose to drink the sour juice of lemons or you can try to make lemonade out of them. People who go for the lemonade inevitably end up happier, healthier and more capable of proactive action on behalf of their loved one and themselves. That’s because attitude impacts action. Our inner thoughts propel our outward movement. Self-pity doesn’t make things better, but neither does being a Pollyanna; somewhere between the two lies the best balance for coping with the reality of caregiving. Being a family caregiver is never easy, but how you approach it — with a glass half full or a glass half empty — is a choice you can, and should, consciously make. Your decision will set the stage for everything else you do.

Know Yourself

Choosing to take charge of your life means recognizing your own strengths and limitations. We all have them, of course, and they affect what we can successfully do ourselves, and what we often need help with. Are you a petite woman caring for a heavy-set man? That certainly will have an impact on how much physical care you are capable of providing on your own. Are you naturally curious, always wanting to understand things as best you can? If the answer is “yes,” then you’ll likely have an easier time gathering the information you need to make caregiving choices.

Knowing your strengths and weaknesses allows you to set boundaries and can give you the confidence to know when to say “no” and when to ask for help — things many family caregivers find very hard to do. Being aware of your strengths and weaknesses and how they may change as you age is a very important step in becoming a resourceful caregiver.

Be Proactive

Knowing yourself and understanding the circumstances that surround you is a start, but taking charge of your life shouldn’t end there. There are other actions you can take to feel more in control. For instance, you can either be proactive about the situation you face, or reactive regarding the caregiving needs of your family. Being proactive means looking ahead and planning to the extent that you can. It means trying to prevent crises rather than letting them happen. In caregiving, one proactive step we all can take is making sure we and our loved ones have the legal paperwork necessary for making critical medical decisions. No one likes to deal with these things, but proactive people make it their business to find a way.

Proactive people always have a better chance of staying on top of a situation, but being proactive doesn’t come naturally to all of us. If being proactive isn’t in your nature, then you need to find a friend or family member who is. This is especially important if you want to feel at least somewhat in charge of what happens to you and your loved one.

Research Is Another Word for Being Prepared

Research takes many forms. One of the most important types of research you can do is to find out as much as you can about your loved one’s illness or condition. It is said that knowledge is power and being armed with an understanding of what you are dealing with definitely provides you with a powerful tool for conversing with the various medical professionals taking care of your loved one. It transforms you from being viewed as a sad-eyed relative into a resourceful advocate. The Internet, of course, is a great way to gather information; searching

the Web is an easy task you can ask someone else to take on. It's an easy way to begin to ask for help.

Research isn't only about gathering formal information, however; it's just as much about gaining an understanding of how the environments you will encounter work: doctors' offices, the ER, or an adult day care center, for example. Gaining an understanding of their rules and practices will make you feel more in command of your caregiving situation and help you get the information you need and the respect you deserve that much more quickly and with less hassle.

Having a positive attitude, understanding your strengths and weaknesses, being proactive, and gathering information through research are just a few of the ways you can begin to take charge of your life. It's largely about recognizing that you do have choices and making the ones most likely to support you in your caregiving role. ■