

Is Your Colleague A Caregiver?

By Sara Lieber, Senior Sidekicks

Did you know most elders will require help with at least two activities of daily living toward the end of life? Who is going to provide that help? The past two censuses show the caregiver is often an adult child, female, and between the ages of 35 and 65+. The caregiver may also be a spouse.

In addition to caregiving duties, most people also have jobs and families. In contrast to childbirth preparation, there are *no courses to prepare people for the caregiving phase*. People are thrown into the caregiving water without advice and preparation and rarely aware of how responsibilities can escalate with time.

Research shows that caregivers suffer health consequences themselves due to the stress of the additional duties and responsibilities. Perhaps you have heard of a couple, one partner is ill and the other a caregiver. The "healthy" caregiver passes away first. Research shows caregivers suffer health consequences from the *continuation* of the care-giving process.

Does this sound like someone you know at your workplace? A colleague might share the first "news" of a relative's illness. Once the patient is out of treatment, they may become less talkative about the situation. This out-of-treatment phase is the *beginning of caregiving*: running errands, follow-up treatments, and possible living adjustments in their household.

Why should you be aware of this at your workplace? Because people continue to do only what they must—work. As the process of caregiving continues, a caretaker's socializing and hobbies tend to drop away. The job site becomes the most consistent meeting place.

Your colleague may be in need of support even if they do not ask for it. Here is how you can help:

- **Ask.** Ask some follow-up questions during the after-treatment phase. Ask them, "How are you doing?" If your colleague starts to talk only about the patient, repeat the question and emphasize the "you." Caregivers, especially, sometimes just need someone to listen.
- **Support.** Encourage your colleague to investigate caregiving policies and find local support groups.

- **Buddy system.** Forming a buddy system can also provide needed emotional support. See if anyone else at work is also a caregiver. Perhaps there are others in the workplace who have had care giving experience and whose loved ones have now passed, who could act as a "caregiver emerita" resource.
- **Research.** Suggest to your colleague using the Internet to research information regarding the needs of their loved one. Follow up by asking your colleague about the results of their search.
- **Self-care.** Unfortunately, caregivers may not realize they need regular rest. Yet, it can only help relieve caregiver stress. You know your colleague; how do they look? Trust *your impression*. Ask and listen. Encourage them to reach out to local resources and to take time for themselves.
- **Red flag phrases.** Your caregiver colleague might use phrases that paint themselves into a corner; "She's my mother", "I'm the only one who does it right" or "Things aren't that bad yet." These statement suggests that the caregiver might be trying to take on too much responsibility and not looking out for their own health and well-being. Caregivers cannot make their patients well by making themselves sick. Encourage your colleague to connect with resources to help in their caregiving duties.

As the old saying goes, "Do not wait for a blizzard to put on snow tires." Having fellow colleagues (like you) provide moral support and relief can help make a difference in a caretaker's life.

Senior Sidekicks offers services to caregivers. Our "Parenting Your Parent" course prepares adult children to cope with the caregiving phase of life. Our services include Medical Visit Companion escorts, and Special Occasion Services enabling family members to participate. Senior Sidekicks provides services to anyone over 18: including veterans, seniors, and disabled. We serve Sangamon & neighboring counties. Contact Sara Lieber at 217-787-5866 or seniorsidekicks@gmail.com. We invite you to visit our website www.seniorsidekicks.com

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