

## The Opportunity to Pause

By Wendy Pearson

Do a simple search and you will come up with a plethora of articles, books, and podcasts on the challenges of caregiving, the importance of self-care, and a laundry list of everything one “gives up” to take care of another person. And there is a lot of truth in those resources. But what you probably won’t find is a thoughtful discussion on the opportunity caregiving provides to take a pause in your life to make sure you are on the right track. I’m nearing the ten-year anniversary of the loss of my mother to multiple myeloma. And as I reflect on that pivotal moment when I first became a caregiver, I’m struck not by the hard work of the endeavor, but by how the experience changed me fundamentally as a person and as a professional in ways that I am just now coming to fully understand and appreciate. Put simply, the person I am now bears almost no resemblance to the person I was before caregiving. And I am forever grateful for that. If I had to guess, and it is a guess, I’d say the following had a lot to do with the changes in perspective, priorities, and direction that I experienced.

### The Opportunity to Pause

Caregiving can interrupt your life in such an abrupt way that it can be quite jarring. No one is prepared to be thrown into the role of caregiver. No one. But once you establish

a routine, something strange begins to happen. I call it the beauty of boredom. My day-to-day routine prior to caregiving was work at work followed by work at home. There were the rare moments between “shifts” where I could pursue my own dreams, but for the most part, my life revolved around my job.

When I suddenly found myself in my childhood home, surrounded by the things I used to treasure, it forced me to take a long, hard look at the life I had created. While there was some good there, I realized that in many ways my life had taken the path of least resistance, where I just accepted what people threw at me without question and without putting my own needs and desires on the table. It was in fact how I became my mother’s caregiver in the first place. But that “decision,” if you can even call it that, was years in the making.

I must admit that it was a difficult realization for me. It was a lot easier to blame others for my decisions and the problems in my life. It was much harder to acknowledge the role I played in setting myself up for a life I didn’t want.

### Caregiving provides the space to have those moments of reflection and self-awareness.

In the quiet of the waiting room, in the hours when my mother was resting, and over those sleepless nights, I experienced breakthroughs that I would not have experienced had my life not been interrupted. I was able to become acquainted not just with the person that I was, but also with the person that I wanted to be. And it was in those moments that I began to dream again about what I wanted to become, outside of the roles I had been playing to date.

Now before you say it, I admit that my life was in complete limbo. I didn’t know how long I’d be home with my mother. I didn’t know whether I’d still have a job at the “end” of caregiving. I certainly didn’t know what the end would even be, and frankly I was almost too scared to think about

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that. But I was coming to a clearer understanding of what I wanted for myself, independent of the role I played in the lives of others, and that was completely new for me.

And while I still mourn the loss of my mother, I am so grateful for the extended time I spent with her and how through that experience my life came out better on the other end.

For those during caregiving and living lives “interrupted,” I urge you to lean into the boredom and allow yourself to really take a hard look at your life. I found journaling incredibly helpful to chart my thoughts as well as to fully explore my feelings.

Here are a few prompts that you may find useful.

- Are you the person you want to be?
- Was your life before caring for your person the life you wanted?
- What dreams have you put to the side?
- Was it your choice to become a caregiver, or did you take the path of least resistance? If the latter, has that been your approach to life?
- Can you say that your job is your career of choice?
- What can you do differently to inject more of what you want into your life?
- Can you imagine a life after caregiving? What does that look like to you?

I encourage you to continue to explore opportunities to reassess your life while caregiving. Connecting with other caregivers is also a great way to support your journey. ❖

## Don't Let Depression Get You Down

*by Michael Plontz*

Caregiving can sometimes be a depressing venture. Not only does it usually involve someone we love deteriorating before our eyes, but our own lives also become completely rearranged. Believe it or not, when the holidays are right around the corner, it can make even those not in a caregiving situation depressed. Imagine what that does to a caregiver.

Depression can range from feeling a little blue to obsessing about death and suicide. It is not just a single disorder, but a group of psychiatric illnesses. This group of illnesses may affect your body and mind, and your mood and behavior. Although it is a serious condition, it is very treatable. Two symptoms to watch out for, and that doctors watch out for, are a loss of pleasure in daily activities



and continuous feelings of hopelessness and sadness. Women have a 50% greater chance of being diagnosed with depression and some types of depression may run in families.

The three most common types of depression are major depression, dysthymia, and bipolar disorder.

Major depression may have many symptoms that affect a

person's ability to carry out necessary everyday activities such as eating, working, and sleeping. Other once-pleasurable activities seem insurmountable. A person can usually go on from day to day but may have a "disabling episode" one or two times in his or her life.

Dysthymia is long term or chronic depressive symptoms. These symptoms may not be disabling, but usually prevent the person from feeling good and functioning well. Major depressive episodes may be experienced by people with dysthymia.

Bipolar disorder, sometimes called manic depression, is often a chronic condition. It causes the afflicted to experience cycles of depression, mania, lethargy, and exuberant happiness. These mood changes are normally rapid and dramatic.

More detailed symptoms of dysthymia and major depression include the following:

- Memory, concentration, and decision-making problems
- Feeling irritable and restless
- Appetite changes-eating
- Insomnia
- Feeling hopeless and pessimistic
- Feeling anxious, empty, or sad
- Feeling tired or less energetic
- Thinking of death and suicide or even attempting suicide
- Losing the ability to enjoy activities that used to be enjoyed (e.g., sex)
- Physical symptoms that don't improve with treatment.

In addition to the above episodes of depression, those people afflicted with bipolar disorder may experience the following manic symptoms as well:

- An obvious increase in energy
- Social behavior that may be deemed inappropriate
- A marked increase in talking
- Impossibly huge ideas
- Severe insomnia
- Happiness not befitting the occasion
- Thoughts that race or are disconnected
- An increase in sexual desire

Anyone who believes they are depressed should seek the help of a professional. With a combination of psychotherapy and medication, 80% of those who are depressed can be helped. Medications include a variety of mood stabilizers, anti-anxiety drugs or antidepressants that have helped many people. The newer drugs have fewer side effects too.

Psychotherapy involves talking to a therapist to resolve problems. Behavioral therapy involves discussing a person's actions and how they can get more satisfactory and rewarding results from them. A patient also learns about his or her behavior patterns and how to "unlearn" the ones that are self-defeating. A severe form of therapy is electroconvulsive therapy (ECT). This is used only when a person can't take the medication, or their depression is so severe that it is life threatening.

If you see any of these signs in yourself or your loved one, seek help soon. Depression is something that can become worse over time if not treated. Life is meant to be enjoyed, despite all its hardships. Don't let depression get you down. ❖



## September's Website

[www.seniorresources.trualta.com](http://www.seniorresources.trualta.com)

## Quotes

*"Compassion brings us to a stop, and for a moment we rise above ourselves."*

– Mason Cooley

*"Caring for our seniors is perhaps the greatest responsibility we have. Those who walked before us have given so much and made possible the life we all enjoy."*

– U.S. Senator John Hoeven, ND

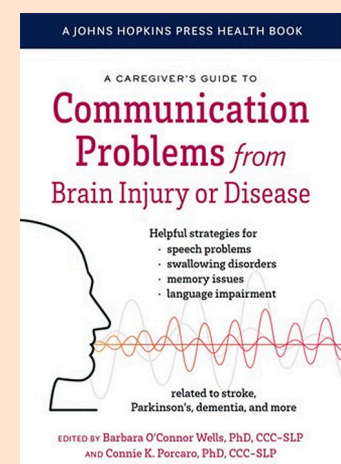
*"We rise by lifting others."*

– Robert Ingersoll

## This Month's Book *Communication Problems*

*A Johns Hopkins Press Health Book*

An all-in-one guide for helping caregivers of individuals with brain injury or degenerative disease to address speech and language.





## The Legal Issues Behind Caregiving

by Sandra Ray

Establishing a precedent when it comes to the care of a loved one is essential, especially with the legal aspects of finances and health care.

- Find a lawyer who can help you establish a will or estate plan for your relative. A lawyer can also provide strong advice on other key developments in the life of your loved one.
- Discuss with your relative important financial aspects such as the location of documents, gaining access to their banking accounts, and stepping in to take over any financial responsibilities they may have.
- Look into the possibility of becoming the power of attorney for your loved one if they become incapable of caring for themselves. Often a durable power of attorney can provide better coverage instead of a simple one.
- A living will can provide an end-of-life decision for your loved one should they become terminally ill. This pivotal paper can tell a doctor just how much or how little care the person wishes to receive.
- Talk with other family members about the intentions of your relative and ask their advice should you feel unsure about any matter.

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## Financial Power of Attorney: Who Needs One?

by Sandra Ray

Many people feel nervous at the thought of a power of attorney. It can be intimidating to consider giving another person or agent the authority to make financial decisions on your behalf.

There are valid reasons to consider a power of attorney if the need arises. In layman's terms, a power of attorney is a legal document that allows someone (an individual or an entity) to conduct business on your behalf. There is more than one type of power of attorney. These include both financial and medical.

- A medical power of attorney should contain specific information about who can make medical-related decisions when someone becomes incapacitated and cannot make these decisions for himself or herself. Experts generally agree that financial powers of attorney should not include medical information.
- A financial power of attorney can be either durable or nondurable. It is important to know the difference and when you may need one or the other. Most people consider durable powers of attorney when there is a chronic illness involved or a date in the future when it might be foreseeable that illness can be disruptive to someone.

### Financial Areas to Consider:

Regardless of the type of power of attorney chosen, there are broad areas of consideration concerning finances. These include (but may not be limited to) the following types of financial transactions:

- Each state allows for standard rights to be allowed through a power of attorney, although you want to do specific research in your state if there are unusual financial circumstances to consider.

### Nondurable Power of Attorney:

- A nondurable power of attorney is generally used for limited transactions. For example, if someone needs to grant authority for a single transaction, such as a stock trade, a nondurable power of attorney would be most applicable. Another reason to use a nondurable power of attorney would be if someone were traveling and unable to conduct business from home. Some states refer to this type of power of attorney as a special power of attorney.

### Durable Power of Attorney:

- A durable power of attorney is the one that often comes to mind. These are the legal documents that can start immediately and allow someone to act on your behalf until it is either revoked or upon your death. For individuals who are facing a chronic, debilitating illness or who may be preparing for a future incapacitation (such as a possible nursing home commitment), a durable power of attorney could fit these situations.
- A durable power of attorney can be written so that it can be invoked at a future point in time. For someone with a chronic or potentially debilitating illness on the horizon, this type of instrument may be best to use. Usually, a physician or other recognized authority will designate the time when an individual is no longer competent to manage their own legal affairs. At that point in time, the power of attorney will "spring" into place, allowing your agent to begin managing your financial obligations. For this reason, sometimes you may see references to a "springing" power of attorney.

## Choosing Someone to Manage Your Affairs:

- Deciding which type of power of attorney may be straightforward, depending on the circumstances. Finding a trusted person to manage your financial affairs may not be as easy. The “agent” can be a family member or friend whom you trust to manage financial affairs with the same due diligence as you would yourself.
- It is generally a good idea to appoint more than one agent, even if you specify that only one of them may act at any given time. For example, a husband gives his wife power of attorney upon finding out that he has Alzheimer’s disease. The wife subsequently becomes incapacitated and is unable to care for her affairs, as well as that of her husband’s. Having more than one agent appointed will allow the husband’s power of attorney to stay in force without possible legal proceedings over his affairs.

## Preparation and Filing:

- You can find standard durable and nondurable power of attorney forms online at several different websites, or an attorney may give you a standard one that includes powers that you can grant or strike, depending on your individual circumstances. An attorney can prepare one for you for a fee; however, it is not necessary for an attorney to be involved unless you have special circumstances to consider.
- A power of attorney is still valid, even if it is not on file at your local county clerk’s office. It does need to be signed in the presence of a notary public. It is especially important to keep originals safe, as sometimes banks and other entities will want to make a copy of the original when granting someone else access to your private financial information.

## Can I Still Manage my Own Finances?

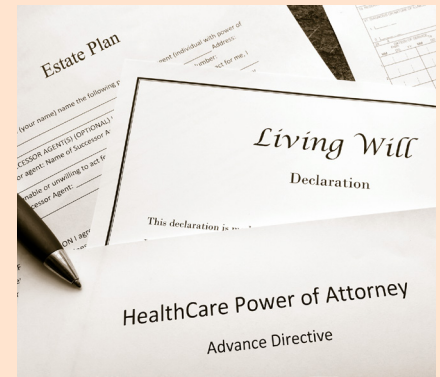
In most cases, the answer is yes. When a “springing” power of attorney is in place, someone other than the agent will make the decision to enforce the power of attorney. Until that point, you are still able to control your own financial decisions. For other situations, as long as you are comfortable making financial decisions, there is no reason that someone else has to do it for you.

## What if it Doesn’t Work Out?

- A power of attorney can be revoked at any point in time. Usually, they are revoked when either the agent or the principal (the person who needs financial affairs managed) decides that the arrangement isn’t succeeding as planned. While it is not necessary to contact an attorney to prepare a power of attorney, some experts suggest that consulting an attorney may be wise when revoking one.
- Compared to making the financial decisions, invoking a power of attorney can be a relatively simple process. Before developing one, make a list of financial obligations and decide how you would want these handled in the event that you are unable to take care of them yourself. Discuss your decisions with loved ones and develop a trust relationship with someone that would be designated as agent. If possible, find more than one agent to avoid delays and other legal complications in the event that your first choice is unable or unwilling to perform the necessary requirements. Decide if you need a durable or nondurable power of attorney. Finally, develop the power of attorney and have it signed. Keep the original in a safe place and make certain your agent(s) knows where to locate it when it is needed.

Discussing issues related to handling financial information is best done in advance when the stress of a chronic illness or debilitating condition will aggravate a situation. Calm decisions made in advance will allow others to make informed decisions when the power of attorney is in force. ❖

*The Legal Issues Behind Caregiving, continued from page 4*



- Have your attorney distribute the proper documents to the doctors, banks, and health care providers of your relative.
- Understand what your loved one’s insurance plan calls for in the event of hospitalization or hospice care.
- Be upfront with your relative about your feelings behind the decisions you make and allow for them to offer their advice should they be of sound mind.
- Find out what financial protection is offered for your loved one when it comes to their Social Security and pension benefits.
- Contact local agencies that deal with legal protection of the elderly and see what services they can provide. ❖



## Driving skills checklist

If you answer yes to any of the following questions, you should be concerned about your loved one's driving skills. It might be time to ask whether it's time they retire the keys.



- Has a friend or family member expressed concern about your loved one's driving?
- Has the doctor advised limiting driving for health reasons?
- Has your loved one been pulled over by a police officer and warned about poor driving behavior?
- Has your loved one been stopped by the police or had near misses or accidents in the last 3 years?
- Does your loved one sometimes get lost on familiar routes?
- Do you notice that your loved one's concentration wanders when they drive?
- Does he or she become confused or angry?
- Do other drivers honk frequently when they are behind the wheel?
- Does your loved one complain that cars or people walking seem to appear out of nowhere?
- Does your loved one have trouble moving their foot between the gas and brake pedals, or do they confuse the two?

It's important to be aware of gradual limitations and how they may affect driving. If you're not sure whether a driving problem is developing, discuss the situation with family members, friends, or the doctor to seek advice. The most important thing is that everyone be safe on the road. ❖

## Design Tips for Living at Home Longer

by Elaine Turner

Every senior wants to remain independent in his or her own home as long as possible. There are four basic elements needed to accomplish this goal: accessibility adaptations, furniture design, color scheme, and sensory accessories. When people feel content in their home environment, they will perform at their highest level, be more receptive to any educational and therapeutic interventions necessary and will be more manageable for caregivers. These tips come from 33 years' experience raising a son with autism and 25 years' experience with my husband who had Parkinson's disease.

Accessibility adaptations will enable individuals to navigate their living space. An assessment of the home and an interview with the individual determine what modifications need to be made. The person needs to enter and exit the home easily, as well as access every area of the home.

The most critical areas are the bathroom and kitchen. In the bathroom, something as simple as an ADA toilet may be needed with a couple of grab bars to help with sitting on and getting off the toilet. The bathing area may require a step-in tub or roll-in shower with grab bars and a shower seat. With the roll-in shower, a combination showerhead with a hand-held piece provides a complete bathing system. In the kitchen, the countertop height and cabinet arrangement may need to be adjusted.

If a person uses a wheelchair, there are appliances made that operate to accommodate the presence of a wheelchair. Further, there are many kitchen gadgets such as reachers to access higher shelves and specially designed utensils to aid in the handling of food and for eating.

In the living area, there should be enough open space to manipulate without any furniture pieces obstructing mobility. Some elimination of some pieces may be necessary and creating a piece that serves a multifunctional use, like a cabinet as opposed to just a table or making a combination table/shelving unit. All



accessibility issues can be accommodated depending upon the person's abilities. Technology is available to provide something new for a specific impairment even if it has never been created before.

Furniture design is the second key element. All pieces should have no sharp corners, meaning that all corners should be rounded to avoid injury if a fall should take place. Traditional couches should give way to a more bench type seating. The seat and seat back can be padded and covered with vinyl for easy cleaning, but there should be a small open space in between the seat and the seat back in the event of a body function accident. The substance will then fall to the floor so that the seating can be cleaned as well as the floor with no consequences. With a traditional couch, the material soaks into the fabric and the padding inside where it remains as a permanent damage.

More furniture concerns are in the bedroom.

- Can the person get in and out of bed?
- Is the person incontinent? The bed construction and materials used can allow for complete cleanup with no damage to the bed itself.

Next, color schemes using calming colors can make a huge difference for the better. A human being's reaction to color is automatic and cannot be controlled. Earth tones such as greens, blues, and beiges/browns are the ideal. Colors that can counter or provoke a negative response are red (raises blood pressure and stimulates hyperactivity) and yellow (makes muscles feel heavier, thus impacting the ability to move typically).

Finally, sensory accessories, which are objects that promote a feel-good feeling, can be added to the space. Providing favorite music, family photos, a soft fabric throw blanket, a live or silk plant, to mention a few, promote smiles. Any object that sparks a happy response can accomplish contentment. All these elements are necessary to create the ideal environment. Once contentment within the individual is achieved, life runs very smoothly. ❖



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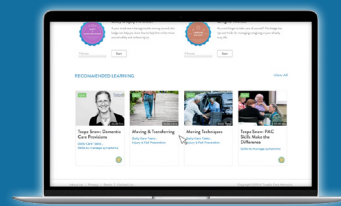


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