

## Balancing Work and Family Care

Jack is 46 and the manager of a sales department. Jack's 77-year old widowed mother recently had a bad fall and broke her hip. Doctors doubt that her hip will mend properly and her fall has been blamed on failing vision. It's predicted that she will be blind in less than a year.

Jack's mother demands more and more of Jack's time while refusing to accept or plan for her loss of sight. Jack keeps his problem to himself. He is sure that talking at work about his troubles would be frowned on. It might even hurt his career. He and his sister often argue about how to solve the problem of their mother's care. Sometimes when Jack's mother acts especially upset and helpless, he calls into work sick and spends the day with her. He feels trapped and tired. He doesn't sleep well and has been suffering severe headaches. Although he tries to push his concerns aside during work, his co-workers see him as grim and irritable. He seems to be stumbling from crisis to crisis.

Jill is 40 and works as a bookkeeper. Jill's father, age 68, is a victim of Alzheimer's disease and is subject to episodes of confusion and anger. Jill's mother, who also has health problems including a recent heart attack, has had many stressful months caring for him. Now exhausted and depressed, she has arranged to place her husband in a nursing home. She remains devoted, misses him desperately and has been spending more than two hours a day on buses to visit him in the nursing home. Jill is worried about how her mother can keep this up. After doing some research, she persuades a transportation service for the elderly to drive her mother to and from the hospital for visits. She also hears from a friend at work about a long-term care facility which might accommodate both her parents and she begins to check this out for details.

**Q:***How are Jack and Jill the same?*

They are both part of a growing number of Canadians who care for elderly parents or other relatives. It is estimated that 80 per cent to 90 per cent of all care for the elderly in Canada is provided by family caregivers, not by professionals, hired help or nursing homes. Among other things, family caregivers clean house, shop, cook, manage finances, bathe and groom, transport and provide company and comfort for elderly relatives who cannot manage these activities by themselves.

Family caregivers like Jack and Jill often provide this care in addition to having full-time jobs and children of their own to look after. About 20 per cent of employees with full-time jobs are also caring for a parent or other relative on a regular basis. That percentage is increasing as our population ages.

**Q:***How are Jack and Jill different?*

Some people seem to thrive as family caregivers. They, like Jill, may find their work and family responsibilities demanding, but they "muddle through" and remain happy and healthy. As a result, they usually provide high-quality care.

On the other hand some family caregivers like Jack pay a high personal price for meeting their multiple responsibilities. They are stressed, depressed and anxious. They may develop physical illnesses of their own or have tensions with other family members or co-workers.

There are certain behaviours which separate "the Jacks" from "the Jills". If you expect to face or already face the challenge of caring for a parent or other family member, here are a few hints for helping you along the way:

1. Sort out with other family members how the task of caring for an elderly relative will be shared. Identify all the things which must be done for that person and decide on ways to "share the load" throughout the family. Doing it all yourself may feel "heroic", but it is usually the least effective way to provide good care. Also remember that the elderly person is not a child and deserves as much independence and self-sufficiency as possible. If your family can't agree on a plan for giving care, consider involving a professional counselor to help.
2. Let people around you know about your care responsibilities. Too many family caregivers feel that keeping quiet about their role is the "honourable" thing to do. You will be more effective as a caregiver if you talk

about your experience, giving friends and co-workers the chance to support and advise you. You will often find that others have gone through similar experiences and solved similar problems.

3. Be flexible both at home and at work. Don't allow yourself to get locked into a rigid schedule of what and when chores must be done. Keep focused on the crucial chores and give yourself permission to skip some of the less essential ones. When time allows, be willing to take on jobs and tasks that aren't normally yours. Ask others at home and work to give you the same flexibility and to pick up on some of your chores when needed.
4. Become an informed consumer of services for the elderly. There are a growing number of community resources to help families cope with an elderly member needing care. Here are just a few:
  - Some hospitals, senior centres and nursing homes offer day treatment and adult daycare programs which provide social contact activities and care throughout the day for elderly people who remain living in their own homes.
  - Volunteer groups often provide services like "friendly visiting", transportation and shopping for the elderly.
5. Take care of yourself. If you're not fit and healthy, the care you will provide will be poor or non-existent. All the usual rules for good diet, exercise and sleep apply here.

In summary, one of the real keys to quality care of the elderly is "caring for the caregiver"--YOU.