

Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

Two years ago my mother-in-law, Mary, moved in with us. We believe that she has some beginning symptoms of Alzheimer's disease. She is a lovely woman, generous and sweet. I've been close to her throughout my eighteen-year marriage. She needs a lot of care, and I seem to be the only one giving it. I work part-time and we have three teenagers, so I'm always busy. My husband is a good man, but his life hasn't changed a single bit since his mom came to live with us, meanwhile, my life has been up-ended. I have no time for friends or other activities. I'm exhausted, irritable, and starting to feel resentment. Sometimes it seems like I'm "just going through the motions" instead of really living. Then I feel guilty because I love Mary, and want to help her in any way I can.

-- Ruth

Dear Ruth,

Your letter gives a perfect description of "compassion fatigue." This is an ever-growing problem as parents of baby boomers age and need extra help. This kind of burnout causes significant physical, emotional, and spiritual symptoms, and you are wise to recognize them.

You need to take a breather. Remember that if you are depleted, you are no help to anyone (not even yourself). So step one *has* to be: find some time for you. Caring for three teenagers and an elderly relative with special needs (while keeping up your house, and working part-time) is a direct path to a melt-down.

Talk with your husband and kids. Let them know that caring for Mary is an honor because she has given so much to all of you in the past. Right now, she needs lots of love and practical help, and *everyone* will be expected to give to her. Make a list and designate responsibilities. Teenagers are perfectly capable of making a cup of tea, spending time talking with their grandmother, or driving her to a doctor's appointment, unless there is some special reason that you need to be there.

You must schedule time for yourself. Go to a day spa for a massage, or have lunch with a girlfriend. Take some time every single day when you can be free of responsibilities for at least an hour. Take a long, luxurious bubble bath reading the magazine that's been sitting on your coffee table. Go to the gym and work out, or join a yoga class – exercise releases powerful hormones that are great stress-busters. Do all those things your eighth-grade health teacher taught you: eat right, get plenty of sleep, exercise. Practice good emotional and physical health maintenance.

Investigate senior programs in your area. If her health permits, Mary could benefit from some time spent with people her own age, making new friends, and finding stimulating things to talk about. Most communities have some kind of program for elderly people. Investigate what's available for her. Better yet, have one of your kids do the research.

You say that you and your family believe that Mary has the beginnings of Alzheimer's. Is this true? She needs to have a thorough examination by a physician. Begin with Mary's family doctor who can make a referral to a specialist. While at the

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present time there is no cure for this progressive brain disorder, there are drug treatments and activities that can improve or stabilize symptoms. If it is the case that Mary is in the early stages of Alzheimer's, you and your family could benefit by joining a support group. You are not alone. It's estimated that more than 4.5 million Americans suffer with this disease. More than 80% of caregivers report frequent high levels of stress and about half say they are depressed. You can find lots of excellent information and support through the Alzheimer's Association (www.alz.org).

Since everyone in your family is accustomed to your "doing it all," you will need to be assertive to get your husband and kids to shoulder some of the responsibility. But it is essential that you do so, in order to care for *yourself* as conscientiously as you care for others. Good luck!

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2005 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) Columns are archived at www.fullpotentialliving.com.