

Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

My mother takes care of my grandmother who has Alzheimer's Disease. I have two small children and when I ask Mom what I can do to help, she says she can handle it and that I already have enough to do with a full-time job and kids. But, I can tell that she's exhausted. My sister, brother, and I want to help but how should we approach my mother?

-- Sally

Dear Sally,

It is best if you approach your mother directly and honestly. Tell her that you love her (and your grandmother) and understand the exhausting challenge she has taken on. Let her know that you're concerned for her health and well-being. Help her to know that you and your siblings feel the enormous pain this devastating disease puts on everyone in the family, and especially on her, as the caregiver.

Alzheimer's is a savage disease of the brain that generally progresses gradually, but the course can be unpredictable, and the duration of the illness can be anywhere from three to twenty years. Quite often, families experience a painful and long goodbye.

You have most likely observed that your grandmother has lost some of her memory, communication, and thinking skills. She may show significant changes in personality, and have difficulty performing even simple tasks that she once took for granted. Drugs and medical interventions are offering hope and more effective treatments for this disease, but as it progresses, other areas of functioning are affected. As the disease advances, more and more is demanded of caretakers until eventually, a person suffering from Alzheimer's will need complete care. Sadly, this disease affects more than four million Americans.

Caring for a loved one with Alzheimer's is simply too much; too hard emotionally, physically, and financially for any one person. This is the time for your family to rally together to help both your grandmother and your mother. Have a family meeting. Plan this conversation so that even family members who live at a distance can participate and help.

Grieve for the changes that your grandmother is undergoing. It helps to express feelings. Then make a list of down-to-earth ways in which the responsibility for your grandmother's care can be divided up. Spending the afternoon with your grandmother so that your mom can go to an afternoon movie, take a nap, or spend some time with her friends can be a godsend to someone who is a full-time caregiver. Offering to make dinner a few times a week – if you live locally – can take one more burden away from your mother. Think practically and creatively. Ask your mother how you can best help her. Listen.

Get help. Make sure that your family is working in concert with your grandmother's doctor. Do you all understand the rate at which her brain functions are deteriorating? Are you all willing to share the decisions that will affect your

grandmother's care? Learn all that you can about Alzheimer's. There are many good books and resources on the subject. One excellent source of information can be found at the Alzheimer's Association website (www.alz.org). Find a local support group, and go to some meetings. It is comforting and very helpful to talk with others who understand what you are going through. Offer to go to some support group meetings with your mother. It will help both of you.

Before she died, my beloved grandmother, Anna Kelly, suffered from Alzheimer's for more than a decade. I can still feel the sadness in my heart as I remember watching this vibrant woman change before my eyes. The pain can be almost too hard to bear, but I also remember my big, extended family sitting around the table at her house as we talked about how we could all help make Nana's life as full and comfortable as possible, and how we could best help each other care for her. We cried together as we talked about what needed to be done, and we laughed together as we recalled old family stories. There is something very powerful, connecting, and healing in helping each other through these wrenching experiences. Let your mom know that you and your siblings want to be part of all of it, and don't take "no" for an answer.

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2003 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) www.fullpotentialliving.com