

THE IDEAL CAREGIVER



The time of being elderly is a time of increasing needs from others, such as family, caregivers elder years. As a family, it is important to choose a caregiver who represents the ideals of a caregiver and who addresses each of the needs an elder requires. Some of the elders needs are the following:

- **Physical needs.** The individual may need help in taking medications, in bathing, in eating, in reading or in getting around the house or skilled care facility. It becomes the job of the caregiver to know which of these needs must be met and to meet them with dignity and respect.
- **Utilitarian needs.** The elderly need help with things like shoveling their sidewalk, mowing their lawn, paying their bills and getting their laundry done. Some of these items can be outsourced to others who, for example, are paid to mow the elder's lawn once per week.
- **Emotional Needs.** The elder may suffer from loneliness, despair or depression that have crept in due to the life changes they have been experiencing. Although they comprise only 12 percent of the U.S. population, people age 65 and older accounted for 16 percent of suicide deaths. Depression in its many forms affects more than 6.5 million of the 35 million Americans who are 65 years or older. Depression in

older persons is closely associated with dependency and disability and causes great suffering for the individual and the family.

- **Mental needs.** The elderly have difficulty with memory loss and dementia that affect their ability to do anything requiring skilled thinking. It can be a minor problem that affects their ability in word-finding or recalling names or it can affect their ability to care for themselves in any capacity.

WHAT MAKES AN IDEAL CAREGIVER?

An ideal caregiver, in its simplest way, means that the caregiver addresses the needs of the elderly person in such a way as to maintain the dignity and respect of the elder without complaint. Let's look at this closer. An ideal caregiver:

- **Puts dignity above all else.** The ideal caregiver doesn't toilet the elderly person with the bathroom door open and does not dress the elderly person when others are present or can come into the room. Even though the elder is completely demented, they deserve to be treated with respect and dignity in all cares, including feeding, dressing and toileting.

Our "ideal" caregiver is Marge. She cares for several residents at a skilled nursing facility. She recognizes that each resident has a different level of ability to care for themselves and she respects when a resident wants to do things on their own, such as putting on his or her own clothing after a bath. She always closes the door when toileting her clients and doesn't make any derogatory comments to them when they are naked, bathing or toileting.

- **Is understanding of the physical ailments, such as arthritis, of the elderly.** The ideal caregiver knows that caring for the elderly means caring for arthritic joints, bed sores or foot ulcers, heart disease,

blindness and deafness. He or she is concerned about not making things worse, such as harming their arthritis, and provides them with medication for their ailments, including something for pain.



Marge always attends doctor's visits with the elderly people she cares for and asks questions about their particular illnesses. She gives them medications as prescribed by the doctor at the right times and notes any adverse reactions. She is aware of those who have arthritis and performs

their cares gingerly, trying not to exacerbate their pain and discomfort.

- **Doesn't talk down to the dementia patient.**

Dementia or just memory loss is common in the elderly and it is easy to want to talk baby-talk to them or to treat them like children. The good caregiver will talk to the elderly in a calm and reassuring voice, speaking to them at a level they understand without talking baby-talk.

Marge knows that many of her clientele are not completely mentally competent and do not understand everything she says. Still, she makes it a point to speak clearly and openly with each individual at the level they can understand. She does not treat even the most demented elderly patients by talking baby-talk and she speaks loud enough for them to hear what is going on.

- **Addresses the nutritional needs of the elderly.**

The elderly population can get easily malnourished due to poor dentition making it difficult to eat food that younger people can easily consume. A good caregiver provides nutritious food in a form the elderly person can eat. This might mean that the food needs to be softened or even pureed before the elderly person can consume it.

Marge knows that some of her clients have missing teeth or ill-fitting dentures. She works with a nutritionist to provide the kind of food that is the most nutritious for her clients and in a form they can best eat it. She watches for food allergies or things like constipation or diarrhea that can come from certain

foods and takes care of those issues, either by giving the appropriate anti-diarrheal or laxative, or by avoiding the foods that contribute to the problems the elderly are experiencing. She follows the weight of the elderly clients and makes sure that they do not gain or lose considerable weight or that they weigh as much as the nutritionist or doctor recommends. The elderly often lose weight over time and, while this might be an appropriate weight gain, it is often a weight loss that also reflects an amount of malnutrition. Marge pays attention to possible malnutrition and feeds the elderly accordingly.

- **Prevents bed sores.** The older patient is at risk for bed sores if they are wheelchair-bound or bedridden. The ideal caregiver moves the elderly person frequently and moves them from the bed to the wheelchair and back, and is vigilant about watching for bed sores or the beginning skin changes of bedsores, putting on lamb's wool devices or other protective wear to prevent any damage to skin.

Marge knows that the elbows, buttocks and heels are the most common places for bed sores so she assesses those and other areas daily for evidence of reddened skin or open areas on the skin. She uses lamb's wool boots and elbow protectors when she feels that these areas are becoming thinner or at risk. She moves her clients from side to side and from wheelchair to bed fairly frequently to avoid bedsores from occurring.

- **Is aware of the financial needs of the individual.**

The ideal caregiver helps the elderly person manage his or her own finances and is careful to give the elderly person just the degree of managing his or her own finance as can be handled by the individual. This may mean helping with bills at home or making sure the elderly person is free of the effects of thieves and scam artists. Valuables are kept in a safe spot and locked up if necessary.

If Marge is caring for an elderly person in their home, she makes certain that the valuables are safe and locked up, if necessary. She helps them pay their bills and advises them on things they need to do or not do to prevent being stolen from by thieves or by scam artists. She never takes things or accepts gifts from the elderly, especially if they are suffering from any degree of dementia.

- **Avoids burnout.** A good caregiver knows when caring for the elderly person or persons is too much

for them and will ask for a volunteer or other caregiver to help them. This is true for care given in a skilled nursing facility and care given at home. If the care is given at home, consider a home health aide as an option to give the primary caregiver a break.

Marge cares for residents of a skilled care nursing facility and sometimes has trouble coping with the most combative of residents. She makes use of other health aides to bathe, dress and toilet these individuals so no one gets hurt and she doesn't get overwhelmed by caring for such complex and difficult residents. She tries not to work a double shift and takes the time off she needs so she can freshly care for these residents when it is her turn to work.

- **Addresses the emotional needs of the elderly patient.** The elderly can suffer from loneliness, depression and thought disorders such as those causing hallucinations and delusions. The ideal caregiver knows these are possibilities and will be aware of any signs or symptoms of them. The caregiver will work closely with the doctor and will handle such symptoms with compassion and care. Medications may need to be prescribed and the caregiver will provide them if prescribed. The caregiver will also talk to the elderly person about how he or she is feeling in order to keep the lines of communication open and to encourage the elder to be open about what's going on with them.

Marge knows that many of her charges have signs and symptoms of depression and when this is the case, she speaks to the doctor about the possibility of taking antidepressants. She gives those antidepressants carefully and looks for effectiveness and side effects. She is aware that it is important to talk to the elder about their feelings and to acknowledge that things

“aren't the way they used to be”. She also looks carefully for delusions and hallucinations and speaks to the doctor when they occur, especially when they occur frequently.

- **Addresses the utilitarian needs of the elder.** A good caregiver will know that home-bound elderly people will need things like having their bills paid, having their lawn mowed and sometimes having their snow plowed. A good caregiver will arrange for these things to be done by someone or will do those things themselves.

Marge cares for some homebound elders who have forgotten that it is important to keep the lawn mowed and the sidewalk shoveled or plowed. She reminds them of that and has hired neighborhood teens to mow the lawn and shovel the driveway and sidewalk on a year-round basis. Marge handles the bill-paying at the resident's home so they don't get behind on their bills. She is careful to handle their money carefully and with respect and never misappropriates their funds.

- **Keeps the family informed.** The ideal caregiver knows that families care about their loved ones but don't always have the time to get in to visit with them due to other obligations. An ideal caregiver will contact the family with any changes or concerns going on with the elder. This includes changes the caregiver has noticed, doctors visits and other concerns that come up.

Marge knows that her clients' families really do care but haven't the time or inclination to get too involved in the elders' cares. She makes weekly phone calls to a designated relative and informs them whenever the elder has a doctor's appointment or a change in their condition.

