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Dear Dr. Grantham:

My father is suffering from vascular dementia. My brother and sister have chosen not to be involved in his care so the responsibility rests solely on my shoulders. He is now in a nursing home but it is an exhausting job making sure he receives the care he needs. He has become very aggressive, sometimes cursing and pushing me. I am physically and emotionally exhausted battling the doctors, nurses and Dad. What can I do to survive this? J. B.

Dear J. B.

I am so sorry that you are so alone in such an intense care-giving situation. If your experience is typical, you have probably become less involved with friends, family and social activities and have little leisure time due to the overwhelming task of caring for your father. Caring for someone with dementia requires a great deal of physical energy, time, and financial resources. The emotional toll of watching the gradual, psychological loss of someone you love can be devastating.

A friend of mine described the pain she suffered watching her husband of some 40 years suffer for years with kidney disease. She experienced many of the same emotions as he: sadness, depression, anger, and helplessness along with the perpetual grief of many losses as the disease progressed. Her own health suffered as did her social relationships. This experience is often not easily understood by those who have not cared for someone with a long term illness.

Here are some survival strategies for dealing with the stress of caregiving:

Get support. Stay in touch with family and friends. Many times people are not sure what to do or say, so they hesitate. Reaching out to others can make them aware of ways they can provide support. Discuss your feelings with a trusted friend or counselor. Join a support group for caregivers. Information about support groups can be obtained from local newspapers, area hospitals and churches.

Stay connected with your partner. My wife's mother was an only child and had the sole responsibility for her own aging mother for about 10 years. Mom spent her afternoons driving her mother around town, preparing her daily lunch and evening meals, overseeing her medical care as well as other duties. Dad often prepared their own meals and did housekeeping chores since Mom was occupied with her mother's care. Caring for an aging parent means changes in roles and routine at home. Ongoing discussions with your spouse are important—sharing your needs, feelings, losses, changes, desires and needs for physical and emotional intimacy. If you do not have a partner, discuss your feelings with a close friend or other supportive person.

Take time for yourself and let the guilt go. Taking care of yourself physically and emotionally is a must. It is common for caregivers to ignore their own needs, often to the point of compromising their health. Work at getting enough sleep, exercise, and eating well. Emotional and physical fatigue are exaggerated by sleep deprivation. Physical exhaustion and stress can contribute to physical illness by affecting the immune system. Don't feel guilty about taking time to do things you enjoy. Take time away from your Dad to reduce stress and depression common to caregivers.

Set limits. Being a caregiver places many new demands on your life. It is O.K. to say "no" to things that will create energy drain vs. energy gain, even if others do not understand. By the way, say "yes" to offers of help by family and friends.