

# Bright Ideas That You Can Use:

## #2 In a Series of Articles on Caregiving from East Central Kansas AAA

*Caren Rugg, caregiver program coordinator at the East Central Kansas AAA, has given permission for agencies involved in caregiving to use this article in their own local paper to draw attention to caregiver issues. Please acknowledge that the article came from East Central Kansas AAA.*

### THE IMPORTANCE OF CAREGIVER SELF-CARE

In our first article on being a caregiver, I challenged you to reconsider how you perceive yourself, if you are in fact one of those doing the tremendous work of a caregiver. I realize that it is a challenge to think of yourself outside of the box of familiar labels, such as spouse, child or neighbor. But you need to be able to recognize the work you do in order to be able to acknowledge the value of those efforts.

Now that you understand that you are filling a void for a person in need, how do you feel about it? Are you scared about the responsibility? Are you angry about your losses? These losses can include time, money, sense of security, or any variety of activities which may be given up to allow more time. Are you feeling the pressures of being pulled in too many directions at the same time? Are you frustrated that now that you have reached the golden years, they are turning out to be more brass than gold? Are you pleased that you are able to help a loved one? Are you grateful that the loved one for whom you are caring is still here with you? Do you feel that you are the only one who can do the job you do? Guess what? All of these feelings are not only normal, but they are real. It's how you respond to your feelings that will make or break how successful you are in caring for yourself.

Let me get personal for a moment. In February of 2000, my husband, who was 48 at the time, suffered a massive heart attack. The damage his heart sustained was so overwhelming that he was approved for disability six months later. I found that I was so incredibly grateful to still have him on earth with me that I shouldered all of the responsibility for our family. We still have a daughter at home who was 8 at the time of his heart attack, and it became my mission to maintain as normal a life for her as possible. I tried every day to reduce the load on him, to keep him from being stressed or too tired. I felt that my shoulders were broad, and if I had to be the breadwinner, and the activities director, and the housekeeper, and the chief cook and bottle washer, I could do those things. As long as I had my family together, I could do it all.

What I quickly found was that no, I couldn't do it all. Not only was I doing myself a disservice, but I was doing him a disservice as well. He had to be my husband, and Molly's father, and to shelter him from those responsibilities was unfair. I had to learn to lean on him and not be afraid to let him assume some of those responsibilities that I had traditionally thought were mine. While I was thankful to still have my husband, I had losses that I didn't fully understand,

and didn't know I needed to grieve until my sense of loss became unbearable. I felt a sense of loss for my husband and the life he had once had and would not have again. I felt a sense of loss for my idea of what our future together would be. I felt a loss for the security of thinking I had some measure of control over my life. Because I was so happy to still have my husband, I was confused about why I felt such grief. And there were times when I was ashamed for feeling anything other than gratitude for still having him. Our lives as we had known them had changed in a heartbeat, literally, and once I understood that our lives were simply different, and not over, I handled my load much better.

As a caregiver, I find I have to bite my tongue at times about what I think he should be doing, versus what he thinks he can do. I have to censor my attitude about what he eats, and how he gets his exercise. I can be concerned, but I can't smother. We each are still finding our way through this newest chapter in our lives, and thankfully we can do that together. What I have discovered is that when we go to the cardiologist, it's all about him, with little consideration for what I, as his spouse, am enduring. Therefore, it is up to me to maintain my own sense of well-being. I have learned that I have to invest time in me, in the things that interest me, and the things that give me an outlet for the spinning wheels in my head. It's not easy, and still a daily effort for me to find me, but if I can do it, you can, too. At some point during each day, make yourself your priority. You'll find that not only do you feel better about yourself, you will feel better about the person for whom you are caring. You won't be selfish for taking care of yourself; you'll be reinvigorated and better able to handle your responsibility. Even if they don't say so, they'll thank you for being a better caregiver, and you'll thank yourself. What's better than a win-win situation?