

# Caregiving Corner

Resources & Solutions for Caregivers

## Family Responsibility – Why we care

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The question of who has primary responsibility for the care of family members, particularly in the case of older parents, was not debated in the early part of the century when there were plenty of adult children to share the caregiving duties and fewer elderly persons needing care. Due to population changes that began during this time through the mid-1900's, demographics necessitated that the issue be examined by society. It was through the creation of social welfare programs such as Social Security and Medicare that our society acknowledged that care of older persons was a societal responsibility not limited to blood ties. The creation of these programs did not, however, lead to an immediate adoption of a new way of thinking about caregiving, and therefore, families continued to actively participate in providing care for their parents. Discussion of moral obligation and the meaning of family responsibility have led people to examine whether or not we actually have a choice to be caregivers to our parents.

The question of obligation to our older family members is typically examined within the context of the exchange theory of aging. The exchange theory is based simply on the idea that reciprocity is the balancing force on interaction within social groups. In the context of aging, the exchange theory presents itself when adult children return the care they received from their parents due in part to a sense of moral obligation, but also due to the knowledge that the balance of reciprocity will work in their favor later with their own

children. This concept is often referred to as 'filial obligation', that is, the responsibility for the care of elderly parents by adult children. Ambiguity surrounding various viewpoints on this topic is largely due to the fact that filial obligation is part of our culture and ethics as opposed to being a prominent part of our laws. The states that do have laws concerning caring for aging parents rarely enforce them because of the widely held belief that decisions about certain family matters, such as responsibility, should be made by the members of a family.

Many researchers and ethicists have examined the basis for caregiving by attempting to determine the motivating factors behind one's assumption of this responsibility. Writers Alexis Walker and Clara Pratt have done extensive research in this area and have found that caregivers' motivations include the feeling of obligation to reciprocate care given to them in early life (exchange theory), the perception or reality that there are no other caregiving alternatives, and the feeling amongst women that they are better able to give up their jobs to care for parents. These motivations are positive in that they cause the action of caregiving, which leads us to wonder – what would cause someone to *not* feel as though they had an obligation to care for their aging parents? The bumper sticker that reads "be nice to your children, they will choose your nursing home" causes us to chuckle, but it also sums up the alternative viewpoint that maybe an option really does exist or, at the very least, that the

exchange theory might actually be a just way in delivering the care *deserved* by an older adult. Ethicist Daniel Callahan does support the belief that we should not feel obligation to care for our aging parents simply because they chose to care for us as children.

Obviously, there are the situations of abuse, neglect, abandonment, or even a poor quality of relationship with a parent that can lead a child to make the decision not to care for their parent without much objection from society.

Understanding one's motivation for caregiving helps to clarify the expectations of what kind of care will be provided. An adult daughter who is a caregiver because there are no alternative options might find herself feeling more desperate and thus providing minimal care. It is vitally important that we, as concerned citizens, aging professionals, service providers, and policy makers become more in tune to the reasons behind someone's decision to be a caregiver and know that, in choosing this role for a myriad of reasons, each caregiver approaches their duties with very different attitudes.