

# Caregiving Corner

Resources & Solutions for Caregivers

## Role Strain

By: Jennifer L. Torpey, MA

Depending on the caregiving decisions made within a family and the availability of its members to participate in caregiving, situations may arise that require role changes. By its very definition, role reversal occurs each time aging parents are cared for by their adult children. Though adult children may not feel out of place providing care, particularly if they have raised children, some older adults experience awkwardness when exchanging roles with their children. This awkwardness is one of the many obstacles that can make caregiving difficult for families.

Role strain can occur when either the care recipient or the caregiver struggles with their new role to the point that it interferes with the rest of their lives and, sometimes, their health. Steps can be taken to minimize the strain once it is identified. If caregiving responsibilities are spread to multiple family members, the role strain will be reduced because the stress of caregiving is shared. However, in situations where there is only one caregiver or where there is a great amount of care being provided, the stress of caregiving is focused on only one caregiver. In those situations, the occurrence of role strain is high. The importance of this issue is that the strain also impacts the person receiving care and can harm the relationship that they have with their caregiver.

From the perspective of the older adult, receiving care can sometimes be a stressful situation because of the belief that care is not needed. This problem is further

compounded when family members willingly offer to assist the older adults frequently. How the caring process begins will also shape the older adult's perspective of the role reversal. The process of role reversal can sometimes happen gradually as the adult child becomes a caregiver by degrees. As expected, a more gradual change is often better received by aging persons. A more gradual implementation of care allows both parties to become accustomed to their new roles while also masking the fact that the older adult is dependent on others for some assistance. In caregiving situations where the roles are reversed quickly, older adults are inclined to immediately sense a loss of independence and helplessness. For them, the strain of allowing the role reversal to occur can be emotionally devastating and can prevent a healthy recovery from illness.

More information is usually disseminated regarding the effect of role strain on the caregiver for two very important reasons. First, the caregiver could be raising their own children and holding down a job while providing care which raises concerns about their ability to function and be productive, healthy members of society at their other responsibilities. Secondly, there is great concern that the role strain felt by some caregivers could affect the quality of care that they are providing to their loved ones. While the caregivers are less likely to feel awkward about providing care, they are more likely to experience the strain associated not as much with role reversal, but with the added

responsibility of caring for a loved one in a long-term scenario.

As a phenomenon, role strain will certainly become more prevalent as more people continue to live longer lives while requiring some assistance. The necessity that some families feel to generate two incomes to support a household will also contribute to the number of women who are juggling the responsibilities of motherhood, career, and caregiving. Steps to minimize role strain should include: utilizing all available services and resource to share the responsibility of caregiving, including yourself in your care and attention as caregiver, and not allowing anyone involved to create unrealistic expectations for how caregiving will take place. Support is available for people in many forms – spiritual, emotional, friendships, respite – but it must be sought out and used in order to be effective in protecting everyone from role strain. Though you may not have planned for your role as caregiver or care recipient, it has become necessary – continue to communicate to those around you while recognizing that feelings of fear, uncertainty, and unhappiness can be normal parts of role reversal.