

# HOW TO PREPARE FOR CAREGIVING ROLE

The journey of a caregiver can sometimes begin unexpectedly and tumultuously, particularly in sudden onset of illness of the older person with little time to prepare for the caregiving role. The older person may also have changes in mobility, mood, cognition, personality and ability to perform daily self-care activities. At the same time, there are multiple duties that require attention and can be overwhelming for a new caregiver.

## **Competing Demands**

The first few months after discharge from hospital are the most difficult. Both the older person and the caregiver may experience emotional distress and reduced well-being. During this period, multiple competing demands can throw the caregiver into a state of crisis and chaos. For instance, the caregiver needs to make adjustments to his or her lifestyle to accommodate the following:

- Provide physical care to the older person.
- Arrange transport to bring older person for important appointments.
- Look into home modification.
- Take time off from work or quit the job to care for the older person.
- Monitor the older person's daily routines, such as medication management, exercise, and diet.

- Support the older person who, at times, have frequent admissions to hospital for infections or medical complications.

### **Caregiver Issues**

Providing care to a frail older person can be a long-term commitment. The caregiver needs support because at times, she will feel physically and emotionally drained. She is worried and concerned for the older person's recovery and medical care. Very often, she gets so caught up with the care responsibilities, she neglects her own needs, her own self-care, personal interests and leisure pursuits. She also receives little positive reinforcement for her care.

### **Preparation for Caregiving Role**

#### **Deciding on the Caregiver**

The commitment to care for an older person has to come from the confidence that one has the ability and the means



to provide for and sustain the older person at home. The caregiving role involves multiple responsibilities such as: providing physical care; making arrangements and contact if external professional services are engaged; making decisions and acting in the interest of the older person; and providing financial support. These responsibilities need not all be undertaken by one person alone. It can be shared among family members. Decisions need to be made as to who will be involved and how will they want to support the older person to remain at home. A family conference to discuss these pertinent issues can be helpful as expectations can be clarified. If the best option is to get a maid, it is good to carefully select a maid that has some experience looking after the elderly and that language will not be a barrier.

### **Caregiver Training and Information**

- Prior to discharge from hospital, it is important to participate in caregiver training conducted by a nurse or therapist in the hospital. This will equip the caregiver with practical skills to look after the older person.
- The family may also consider it useful to engage the doctor, case manager or medical social worker to discuss the discharge care plan.
- Talk to the doctor to gather information of the disease, progression, side effects, etc.
- The medical social worker can provide information on available community resources, such as rehabilitation programme, transport services, respite care, community hospitals, dementia day care, home help services and caregiver support services.

### **Financial Support**

The medical expenses and cost of looking after an older person can result in financial strain to the family. One way to manage the expenses is to do up a list of required items and compute the average expenditure per month. Balance this with the available disposable income. If there is a shortfall, be realistic to appraise the budget and see if there are any areas where spending can be reduced.

### **Caregiver Well-being**

The caregiving role can place a caregiver at risk of stress, poor health and social isolation. When taking up this role, it is necessary to maintain and improve the caregiver's well-being.

- Have sufficient sleep, diet and exercise.
- Keep a positive mindset.
- Have realistic expectations.
- Learn to relax.
- Get support from others.