

DEPRESSION IN THE CAREGIVER

(Dorothy Womack, www.caregiver.org)

Depression seems to be part and parcel of becoming a caregiver to a loved one. Depression is, in reality, anger turned inward. This is not always obvious, nor is it easily admitted to. There are so many areas we experience anger along the way. As we watch our loved one struggle to do simple tasks, watch them decline in mind and body, watch them lose their independence and eventually their lives in the process.

We, as caregivers, also experience simultaneously many losses of our own. We realize we are totally helpless in the face of encroaching illness and intense suffering. We cannot wave a magic wand and give our loved ones back their sense of control, nor can we retain the delusion that we have much control ourselves. We are merely outstretched hands to help our loved one to live as comfortably as possible in the days remaining to them.

Often, depression stems from extended stress, or is situational in origin. This is due to the tremendous responsibilities that fall to us as the caregiver, to give 100% and go beyond that many times over, doing whatever is necessary to insure quality care for our loved one. There is also clinical depression, of which I personally suffer, which is biochemical and inborn to the person, which adds to the overload and wreaks great havoc in its wake. Some days I found it hard to keep going on, keep doing, keep giving. However, it was during those times that I realized that it was my efforts that enhanced the quality of my mother's remaining days. Without my help, her suffering would have been intolerable. So, while I was unable to escape my depression, I was still quite aware that my contribution made a difference to another person's quality of life and this knowledge outweighed the influence of chronic depression. The love I carried for my mother enabled me to rise above my own disabling depression and to do that which assisted her in living out her final days with as much peace as possible.

As a believer in a power greater than myself, I gained strength to do what was necessary at the time. Having faith does not preclude experiencing depression. We are human beings and react to rapidly changing situations and traumatic events. All I know for sure is that my mother's final days were richer for having me as her caregiver, and I will never regret what was required of me. This was my gift to her for giving me my own life. While depression may be my lifetime companion, it has not succeeded in overcoming the love I carry in my heart for my mother. Becoming a caregiver requires a commitment in your heart, to essentially bear another's burden. I am grateful for every single day that I made the choice to do this. I know, without any doubt, that my life made a positive difference and this knowledge makes it all worthwhile.....