

Creators Syndicate

By Marilyn Willison

Full disclosure; Even though I've been obsessed with health issues my entire life, I've never been interested in working in the medical field. Most of my classmates from my all-girls high school chose nursing as a career, but I was so freaked out by hospitals and illness that I was the only teenager in my class to actively boycott working as a Candy Striper.

But life has a funny way of catching up with you. So here I am, more than five decades after my high school graduation, firmly in the throes of a family medical situation in which I am a Caregiver. Unfortunately, my husband is battling lung cancer, and I—for the first time ever—have an adult who looks to me to make sure that everything from appointments to comfort level to dietary restrictions to medications are maintained and observed.

Because I am so clueless about the role of a Caregiver, I did what I always do when I need help—visit my local bookstore. Fortunately, I found exactly what I needed in a comprehensive—but lighthearted—book that was written five years ago, *You'd Better Not Die or I'll Kill You; A Caregivers Survival Guide to Keeping You in Good Health and Good Spirits* by Jane Heller (Chronicle Books, \$18.95, 288 pp).

The reason I found this book so useful, is that Jane Heller—a successful author—wisely avoided the “You need to do A, B, C, etc.” syndrome of lecturing the reader about the right way to care for a loved one. Instead, she shared three helpful resources; her personal experiences of helping her husband cope with a chronic case of life-threatening Crohn’s disease, the insights of other non-medical individuals who had cared for an ill loved one, and advice from a variety of health-care professionals.

Not everyone in Heller’s book is dealing with a sick spouse. “Dear Abby” columnist Jeanne Phillips tells about the conflicts that arise when a parent is older and ill. And we also learned about the challenges involved when caring for a sick child. So why did a successful author of romantic comedies tackle such a daunting subject? “I wanted to help all of us take care of ourselves so we’re able to take care of those we love.... I wanted to express (and encourage you to express) the emotions we all have when caring for a loved one but are often too guilt-ridden, fearful, or embarrassed to say what’s really on our mind’s....I wanted to reach out to other Caregivers...and let them vent or offer inspiration or serve up a helpful tip or two....I wanted to be the cheery, knowledgeable companion I wish I had had [when in my husband’s hospital room].”

According to the National Family Caregivers Association, 40 to 70 percent of caregivers exhibit some form of clinical depression. And if you are caring for a

spouse your symptoms of depression or anxiety maybe as much as six times higher than that of non-caregivers. If you are caring for a parent, that rate will be twice as high as for non-caregivers. This is important information because close to 70 million Americans are currently Caregivers, which means that about 29 percent of the adult population in the US is walking around feeling stretched and pulled in a variety of different directions.

The one thing I've learned so far about being my husband's Caregiver is that *my* disappointments, fears and tears will not help his situation. My job right now is to be fully in control and completely in the moment. If I hadn't avoided the Candy Stripers back in 1966, I probably would have known that already!

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