

## April Senior Sense: When Caregiver Guilt Hits, Choose Differently

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At first my father lived a few miles down the road, in an assisted living apartment. He was mostly happy there but he missed his old life – walking the neighborhood, visiting neighbors, afternoons at the public library. And he missed his wife; my mother died a few months after he moved into the senior living facility. I did my best to visit him one night a week on my way home from work plus one weekend day. I'd take him out – to my kids' soccer and basketball games, to the ocean, for ice cream.

But I couldn't always make the schedule work. My kids led active lives and needed me home for homework help, or to drive to practices, or shop for costumes for dance recitals and school plays. My job was demanding, there were late nights, work assignments I brought home to finish after dinner, and lots of travel. And when I couldn't visit my father, the guilt was overwhelming.

I knew that if I skipped a week of seeing him, there was a really good chance he would have no visitors at all. After all, his siblings were older and couldn't always make the drive. So many of his friends had passed away. The old neighbors lived too far.

I know now, my guilt was misplaced. I came to this conclusion reading *The Longevity Economy*, a book about the growing older market, by Dr. Joe Coughlin, director of the MIT AgeLab. People are living longer, and likely with chronic illnesses and society needs to learn how to support them. In the book, he talks about the challenge to ensure quality of life, for a century of life. As business leaders, health care professionals, and others figure that out, it falls to us, the caregivers, to provide support for our aging parents. And so we support them: we manage their basic needs, like food and shelter, their medical needs, often their financial needs, and their social needs.

Of course, we feel guilty. There is always more we could be doing to improve our parents' quality of life. But that isn't realistic given the fact that there are only 24 hours in a day and we also have our own lives to manage. Understanding this, we can choose to replace our guilt for what we can't get to, with appreciation for all that we are handling. That's my wish for family caregivers – gratitude, forgiveness and compassion – for themselves.

After my Dad's dementia advanced, he moved to a skilled nursing facility. He was disoriented and lonely and I vowed to spend a few good hours with him every Saturday afternoon. My kids were a bit older and spending their weekend afternoons with friends, so I could make the schedule work.

But some days, just getting to an hour was tough. Some days my father didn't know who I was or he didn't want to talk. Some days he fell asleep and I would be sitting alone with nothing to do. When I got up to leave, I would be relieved, excited even. I was heading off to do whatever I wanted on a weekend afternoon. My father, however, was stuck in that place - in a wheelchair. And then guilt would strike.

I realized, however, that there was another way to look at the situation. Wouldn't it be irresponsible of me to waste what I did have and what my father did not? I was able to go places, to move without pain or assistance, to pursue my goals and dreams. And wouldn't the real guilt be in squandering my life, when others could only reminisce about theirs? I decided the way I could honor my father was to live to the fullest. That's another wish I have for family caregivers - that they value their own lives as much as they value the lives of those they care for.

So when caregiver guilt hits you, take a moment and consider how you might reframe your thoughts. Notice your self-talk. Is it supportive or is it critical? Instead of focusing on what you didn't do, or didn't do perfectly, can you focus on the effort you made? Can you thank yourself for what you do well? Tell yourself you are trying and that is good enough. Because it's true, caregiver. You're doing your best and there's no shame in that game.

Liz O'Donnell is the founder of [Working Daughter](#) and the author of [Working Daughter: A Guide To Caring For your Aging Parents While Making A Living](#). For caregiving support, information and resources contact a Senior Care Advisor at Care.com. We are master's-level social workers specializing in adult and senior care. Call us today at (855) 781-1303 x3 or email questions to [careplanning@care.com](mailto:careplanning@care.com)

