

EmployeeCare News

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Ronald Wean

Are You in the Caregiver Bermuda Triangle?

By Ronald H. Wean, LPCC, CEAP, Counselor



“You have leukemia.” These words are powerful words, just as powerful as the words, “You have cancer” or “You have congestive heart failure” or “You have Alzheimer’s.” or “You have diabetes.”

These words are powerful words, but not just to the suffering. These words also powerfully impact the friends and family supporting the ones struggling to regain their health. And this

struggle for health is not limited to isolated parts of life, but impacts every aspect of life together. For the sick, regaining health becomes a war zone, a dog fight for survival to maintain one’s self, one’s identity and integrity, and loving relationships with others. Many times, the struggle leaves everyone feeling powerless and helpless “to do anything that will make it better.”

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“Recently, I have concluded that I no longer know what to say or do for my sick spouse. For years, we were like two peas in a pod. We always seemed to have the energy to work out our disagreements so that neither one of us would be left with resentments. But since chemo-therapy began, everything has changed. I sense we are becoming distant, almost like strangers. I find myself becoming resentful, but sulk in silence because I do not know what to do. I just don’t want to make it worse. And yet, I feel guilty for being resentful and I fear that I am doing it all wrong.”

Guilt, fear, and resentment are normal reactions to chronic disease; these are reactions that impact personal relationships. After all, no one consulted you or asked your opinion as to whether or not your loved one should get sick. And no one ever volunteered to give up their health. People just get sick. It happens without anyone’s decision or consent. Being resentful, yet feeling guilty over the resentment, and the fear the loved one may not live cause caregivers to fall into “the Bermuda Triangle of Caregiving.” When caregivers enter the Bermuda Triangle Zone of resentment, guilt, and fear, relationships often fall off the radar, disappear, and get lost.

Caregiver Survival Skills

How do caregivers survive the impact of the illness and yet, use the struggle for health to actually strengthen the relationship with sick loved ones? After all, swimming in the Bermuda Triangle is no vacation. It’s all uncharted territory. There are few resources and the compass just keeps spinning round and round. It’s very unnerving.



However, there are certain survival skills that may serve as life rafts while navigating out of the Triangle of guilt, resentment, and fear. These skills include the following:

1 Use your fear.

Fear is an acronym for F.E.A.R., that is, Find Every Available Resource! Caregivers need to seek out supportive people – other caregivers who

are knowledgeable, understanding, and unafraid to talk about the fear, guilt, and resentment Triangle. In other words, find and attend the caregiver support groups. After all, to whom will you talk when your loved one is enduring treatments that are extremely unpleasant and time consuming? Who will understand when your loved one’s last drop of good will toward you was just consumed in the last drop of chemo? Who else, but those who have gone through it?

There might be some well meaning people, people who do not get it, telling you nonsense that sounds a lot like, “Just hang in there ... you can always buy puppies from Kroger’s!” That advice is not helpful. You deserve to talk to people who can not only validate your experience in the Triangle, but also share the survival skills they have found to be helpful. In this way, your feelings can be processed and normalized while you learn from their experience, strength, and hope. In a support group, you can have helpful and serious conversations about your life from people who know what they are talking about!

2 Be honest with your sick loved one.

They probably do not have the energy or patience to get in the Triangle with you to process your fear, guilt, and resentment. That processing needs to happen in your support group. But even though you cannot process feelings with your sick loved one, you can share your fight to survive the Triangle. It is a way to assure the sick loved one, “I am going to fight for us by being honest with you.”

The alternatives to being honest are not pleasant. Withholding information is the worm that destroys trust in the relationship. Silence is the enemy. “You’re only as sick as your secrets” raises the question, “I have a sick loved one. Do I really want to make our relationship sick too, by not being honest?”

3 Get accurate information.

You have a right to informed consent. If you have questions regarding your loved one’s treatment, be persistent and ask until you are satisfied. If you have difficulty understanding the language the health care providers use be persistent and ask for a translation. If you have questions regarding the progression of the disease and how to trouble shoot problems before they happen, be persistent and ask for a “map” of expected



interventions, time lines, and treatment side effects. Again, your continued efforts are your best ally in getting accurate information.

4 *It is not about the caregiver.*

When your loved one cries as the once rich head of hair is being combed out in the bathroom sink, remember, it's not about you. When your loved one sighs looking in a mirror at the once muscle toned body shaped from hard labor and exercise, remember, it's not about you. When the rich voice that was always clear, strong, and musical is reduced to a weak rasp, remember, it's not about you. When mountains come from mole-hills, and everything is in meltdown mode, "because you left a dish in the kitchen sink!" remember, it's not about you. Your time to talk and focus on your own needs is in the support group. Your group can help you process and normalize your experience. However, it is supportive to show up and be with your loved one in front of both the kitchen and bathroom sinks, the mirror, and in the whispering rasp.

So, what can I do when I show up? Simply this: **STOP TALKING AND LISTEN!** Let them cry and talk. Be a witness to their feelings, and, if you must speak, just say, "It must be hard for you to see, feel, and notice" And then, be quiet and let them continue! Your friendship and love is based on the fact that you both get it – that you understand one another – so be quiet and hold your loved one. Learn from your loved one's sharing of the journey into sickness. In the midst of the Triangle your giving and receiving with your sick loved one will make your relationship more disease resistant.

5 *Get some sleep!*

Insomnia is the enemy of health. Without sleep, there is no focusing, concentration, or motivation to act in one's own best interest. According to numerous studies, the lack of sleep is linked to the development of the most common chronic illnesses. Thinking only about your loved one's illness while attempting to sleep is like building a garage, brick by brick, and then, taking it down, brick by brick, and then, starting over.

You have to get sleep! After all, what good will it do if you get sick too?

Many people have found help in getting to sleep through the spirituality embodied in the Alcoholics Anonymous Serenity Prayer. This prayer is quoted as follows, "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." Praying may not fit your belief system, but for whom it does, it may help you to gain a perspective, a framework for serenity in the midst of the Triangle. A helpful perspective would be, "I did not cause this disease, I cannot control this disease, and I certainly cannot cure it." With the help of a supportive community, the spiritual skills of surrender, acceptance, courage and forgiveness give many people the night of sleep that will help them face the new and difficult care giving challenges tomorrow.

If you are in the Bermuda Triangle of Caregiving, having a free and confidential conversation at EmployeeCare may assist you in charting the course with your loved one. Call (937) 208-6626 to schedule an appointment today.



Making Positive Choices: A Small Group Learning Experience for Teenage Girls

Adolescence is a hard time for you and your children. This can be a turning point that can impact the rest of their lives. The friends they make and the internal messages they retain can impact the adults they become. It is often difficult to know whether or not your child will think through the consequences of their actions vs. acting on their first impulses. Teens often try to test their boundaries, and sometimes this has regrettable ends. This group will aim at helping adolescents understand and use a process of making responsible choices that will in turn enhance their self esteem. Appropriate for ages 13-16.

This group will meet for six consecutive Thursdays from 6-7:30 p.m., beginning Oct. 14 and concluding on Nov. 18. Please call EmployeeCare at (937) 208- 6626 to sign up your adolescent for an assessment before Tuesday, Oct. 5.

Space is limited and a second session is tentatively scheduled for early 2011.



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Do you want to know more details about your Employee Assistance Program? Do you want more information about each counselor?

Here's how to access our web site. Type in:

1. www.PremierHealthPartners.org
2. Select: Miami Valley Hospital
3. Select: Services
4. Select: (A-Z)
5. Select: E
6. Select: EmployeeCare

EmployeeCare

Located: 409 E. Monument St.
Suite 201
Dayton, Ohio 45402

We have satellite offices in Eaton, Springboro, Troy, Greenville and on the Good Samaritan Hospital campus

Hours: 8 a.m. – 7 p.m. Monday – Thursday
8 a.m. – 6 p.m. Friday

All counselors provide evening appointment times

Phone: (937) 208-6626 or (800) 628-9343
(24-hour, toll free)

Services Include:

- Voluntary, confidential assessments. Short-term counseling and referral services for employees and household members covering a wide range of issues. Services are free and number of accesses unlimited.
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