



## Family Caregivers of British Columbia

### No More Guilt

The emotion that seems to run most amok in the terrain of caregiving is guilt. Adult children are consumed by it either because they feel they are not doing enough or because their parents know exactly how and which guilt buttons to push. Either way, the guilt can be instantaneously triggered.

#### Self-Inflicted Guilt

Jane is an only daughter, age 50, and married. In addition to working full time, Jane does her mother's marketing and shopping, and balances her checkbook. Yet Jane is haunted by the gnawing feeling that she ought to be doing more. Because she loves her frail, 80-year-old mother very much, and because she is appreciative of her mother's many sacrifices in her behalf, Jane would like to return in quantity and quality her mother's good deeds. Jane's mother does not demand this of her: Jane demands it of herself.

Jane is one of many devoted daughters and sons who believe in the myth of return of total care. Simply put, Jane feels that unless she can return to her mother all the wonderful care her mother gave her as a child, she is somehow "bad" and not doing her job. Jane also doesn't stop to consider that she is older with less available physical and emotional stamina. Jane also doesn't stop to consider that raising her three children who are now independent was dramatically different from caring for her mother, who will become increasingly dependent and require more and more care. Without realizing these stark realities, Jane is caught in a no-win situation where guilt tears her apart. Is it any wonder Jane is always depressed?

#### Pushing "Guilt Buttons"

Leonard, age 57, is also an only child who is riddled with guilt for different reasons. His mother, and after all who is more expert, knows exactly which of Leonard's guilt buttons to push. Aware that a large part of Leonard's self esteem rests upon being a "good son," she barrages him with demands to visit and call, and for more attention. Hale, hearty, and of sound mind, 86-year old Edna constantly jabs Leonard with just the right words to produce guilt: "If you loved me, you would visit more often; you're always having such a good time, how can you forget your mother who is all alone and old; you owe me so much after all I did for you; I see what other children do for their parents and it is more than you do for me."

Such calculated salvos do the trick each time, catapulting Leonard into instant filial duty, often at the expense of his own family and health. Is it any wonder then that in the five years since his father died Leonard has developed irritable bowel syndrome? Is it any wonder, likewise, that Leonard's wife, Marge, is in a fury over the time Leonard spends if not visiting with then worrying over his mother?

### **Understanding Irrational Guilt**

In each story, guilt is the toxic ingredient, stirring up unease, tension, and free-floating angst in the key players. Destructive and, I believe, having no place in aging parent-grown child relationships, guilt must be understood in its irrationality and ultimately eradicated.

Jane must realize that total care can neither be returned nor should she expect it of herself. That old catch phrase, "How come one mother can take care of ten children and ten children cannot take care of one mother? no longer washes in a society where children are saddled with unprecedented responsibilities and are older themselves. Jane and Leonard, moreover, must ask themselves why they are feeling guilty.

If they are truly doing all they can within the limitations of their busy lives, then their guilt is irrational, accomplishing naught but self-punishment. Leonard, especially, must not buy into his mother's guilt trips. If he feels stuck, then he must get help, either from a support group for children of aging parents or a mental health professional.

### **Caregiving from Love or Obligation?**

First and foremost, Jane and Leonard must do what is right for them. In so doing, they give care from love rather than obligation, which is what most parents want anyway. In so doing, they take care of themselves, which is also what most parents want. I have as yet to meet a parent (an emotionally healthy parent, that is) who wants her child to become ill while caring for her. Most parents, in fact, want their children to "have it better" than they. Most parents, too, are willing to listen to children's expressions of their life needs, provided their children approach them with respect and without rancor. Guilt does not spawn the behaviour necessary for this kind of mature encounter. Dr. Dorothy Wagner in her marvelous little book, *Prescription for Living* (Fawcett Columbine, 1990), quotes from Shakespeare's *Henry V*: "Self-love (vanity) is not so vile a sin as self-neglect." Grown children who care for aging parents must be ever mindful of these words - they offer a powerful antidote to guilt!

*By Vivian E. Greenberg*