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Can The Patient Reduce Caregiver Guilt?

BY MICKEY GOODMAN

Patients may wonder how they can ease the burden on their loved ones after they are gone. Experts and survivors weigh in.

> **Don't try to protect the caregiver.** Ellen Heyman, program director of The Gathering Place, says protecting the caregiver interferes with communication. “A wife can begin the dialogue by teaching her husband to use the washing machine,” she says. “Simple lessons may lead to more meaningful discussions on finances or funeral arrangements.” These topics may be difficult to hear but can relieve the guilt of doing something their loved one wouldn't want.

> **Put it in writing.** Relationships differ, and the dynamic between a patient and his or her caregiver will influence the style and method of communication. If conversations are uncomfortable, patients can write letters to loved ones expressing their love and appreciation, as well as their wishes about finances and funerals.

> **Offer guidance.** For caregivers who weren't heavily involved in certain roles, such as the family finances, the patient can help their partner become more comfortable in that new responsibility. Leanne Jones and her husband mapped out a 25-year financial projection that included home repairs, new cars, college tuition, and even weddings for their girls. They transferred the house, cars, bank accounts, and utilities into her name and put together a notebook. “When I feel finances or my life are out of control, I go to the notebook and get back on track,” Jones says.

> **Don't shy away from the hard topics.** Deborah Newquist, PhD, director of geriatric services at ResCare HomeCare, advises couples to have the tough conversations, such as future relationships, to learn the wishes of their loved ones. She cautions caregivers: “Never promise not to remarry. You never know what the future will hold. Life can turn in a way that no one anticipates, and breaking a promise may make it more difficult to move on.” For Jones, her husband, Brian, told her she had “too much love to give to waste and that he wanted me to remarry. If and when that time comes, I won't need to feel guilty,” she says.