

Caring for Elderly Parents

Ellen: My mother is quite old. She's 94. For someone her age she's remarkably well and fit. She's been having a bit of trouble with one of her knees lately so she doesn't do as much walking as she used to. She still walks short distances though.

Carol: Hello this is Carol and I want to welcome you to Women of Hope. Today we have the pleasure of having a small group of women with us to share their stories of about their elderly parents. These women all work together to create our Women of Hope program. Tammy, who's our first guest?

Tammy: Well, that would be Ellen. Welcome Ellen...my, your mother is just beginning to have trouble with one knee at 94?! She *is* fit for her age. Can you tell us more about her?

Ellen: Well, Mum still lives by herself in a small house. She looks after herself but someone comes to do the house cleaning for her. She only cooks really simple meals these days - but she used to cook and bake quite a lot.

Because she's so old she finds that a lot of her friends have now died. Sometimes she gets quite lonely. But I can't visit her or help her very often because I live a long way away from her. To get there I have to go by plane or ship. These days she doesn't find travelling easy so she can't come to stay with me, and my family, like she used to. My brothers and my sister don't live very close to her either. My sister has to travel 2 hours to get to Mum's place and she's the closest one!

Tammy: How do you feel about that?

Ellen: I would really love to spend more time with my mother and I feel sad that I can't. Sometimes I feel a bit guilty too. There are things I really wish I could do, like calling in for a chat, helping her when something needs doing or having her visit for a meal. She has some lovely neighbours who often help her when she needs help. I sometimes think that other people are doing some of the things I should be doing.

But I can call my mother on the telephone - we often have quite a long chat. That helps...she enjoys the chats and so do I. She's learnt to use email on a computer at the local library and so once a week she goes there to check emails my sister and brothers and I send to her. So we do keep in touch, but it's not the same as being able to see her whenever I'd like to.

Tammy: Wow – at 94, you mother goes to the library and uses the computer? That's wonderful. Yes, it must be hard living that far away – but I'm sure she loves those chats on the phone.

Carol: Another of our guests today is Marj. Welcome, Marj.

Marj: Thank you Carol.

Carol: Can you tell us about your parents?

Marj: Well I also lived far away when my parents were getting older and needed some help, but I was happy that my brothers and sisters took good care of them. They would visit regularly and take meals to Mum and Dad. They would go with them to help carry the shopping; and they would

do small jobs like cutting a branch off a tree, or cleaning the gutters. Or they would fix up something that was broken.

After my mother died, my father had quite a lot of falls, so my brother prepared a little cabin behind their place and Dad moved in close to them. My brother helped my father to sell his house and helped to pack up all their things.

Carol: That must have been a relief for you to know that he was being cared for so well.

Marj: Oh yes – my brother made sure Dad got to his doctor’s appointments on time, and collected his pension payments. He also made sure he had an up-to-date will made out, so we all knew what he wanted done with his things after his death.

Carol: That was important.

Marj: Yes – and my sister and I were able to be there when both our parents were dying. I was very glad that I arrived home a week before my mother died. We were by her side, with our father, for the whole week. She was a Christian, and although she was in severe pain, her last words were: “No matter what happens, God is so good.”

When my father was very ill we were able to be with him for his last week too - in the little cabin. He talked with us about the past, and asked us to sing to him...a special song he loved called: “Were You There When They Crucified my Lord.” As we sang it, he cried. It was a very special time for us.

For both parents, I’m sure it was a comfort to have us nearby during their last days. And it’s a comfort to us to have those memories.

Tammy: I wonder if *your* parents are still living. Do you take care of them? Maybe they live in your home – or you live in their home. We would love to hear about your relationship with your parents. We’ll tell you how to contact us later.

Now we have another member of our team here – welcome Ros.

Ros: Thanks Tammy. It’s always good to be here with you.

Tammy: So Ros are your parents still living?

Ros: No, and I lived away from home too for most of my married life as my husband’s job took us to many different places. We did have a few very special years living close to my parents.

My two brothers, who lived close by, took good care of them as they got older. The best way I could care for them was to write letters often and tell them things about their grandchildren. We loved visiting them whenever we could with our little family.

When my parents became old, my mother forgot many things – especially things about what was happening around her and how to take care of her home. It was so hard for my father as my mother did not want to move out of their little house by the river. Some days when she wasn’t well, she could sit up in her bed and enjoy watching the ducks on the river and the people playing golf on the other side.

Tammy: That’s nice – so she still felt like she was part of what was happening around her.

Ros: That's right Tammy – it was good to know that she didn't feel shut away.

One time I was visiting and to help my dad look after Mum properly, I was cleaning out the wardrobe where they kept their clothes. I made sure everything was mended and that I hung matching clothes together. I threw out anything that was old and could not be worn any more. And I put little labels on the shelves and the drawers so my dad could find the right clothes.

My mother was sitting up in bed writing on a piece of paper – she loved to write, but by this time her writing did not make sense. She looked up at me and asked, “Do you have any brothers and sisters?”

I felt very sad that my own mother could not remember her children and didn't seem to know who I was either. But that did not stop me loving her and wanting all the more to take care of her as much as I could.

When she died we were still living away from home and I was not able to get back in time to be with her. She actually died while I was on the plane, flying home. I was very sad. But it was time to be strong for my father and to help organise her funeral. We sang their favourite song, “Great is Thy Faithfulness”, as we celebrated her life. This song tells us that God is faithful as we trust in him every day. My parents had both put their faith in God and his son Jesus.

My father found it hard to be happy without my mother. When he got very sick I was able to come home this time and help to care for him at the hospital until he died. In the last days we played him some of his favourite songs about God and his love. He enjoyed listening.

His last words to me before he died were – “You remember my mother's name don't you.” He wanted to be sure we did not forget her. It was not long before he would see her in heaven – along with his father and brothers and of course his wife, my mum! We were happy for him, but sad for us!

I'm glad my father talked about his mother before he died. I was only 6 years old when she died and I often think about her now and wonder about all the things *she* did in *her* life.

Carol: Robyn, you're the newest member of our team. It's good to have you here with us today.

Robyn: My father was a very independent man who managed to do most things himself. My mother died about 19 years before my dad so then he lived on his own. He spent a lot of time in Hong Kong and China helping people there. When he came home to Australia for short visits – and when he came home to stay – he would visit us a lot, and we would often stay with him in his house. He did not want me to do things for him, but he loved me to come and talk with him, go shopping with him or go out to a café. He and I became good friends and I would go to him for advice, especially about health things for me, or my family, as he was a doctor.

But when he could no longer work he got old and more dependent quite suddenly. He also became lonelier as he couldn't go to visit friends much. Going out took too much energy. He would love to sit and read and listen to music. I would go as often as I could to see him but I was working part-time and had a husband and 2 children to care for too. We talked about him moving out of his big house into something smaller near me or even finding a bigger house for us all to live in but he didn't want to. He couldn't think about packing up his house and all his things and moving. He was stubborn and just ignored the idea and continued on, not always being very well, or eating properly. I would cook for him once or twice a week to eat with us or to take to him. He loved that.

He didn't want me to do anymore! He died about 7 years ago in a nursing home after he had a serious fall.

Dad's greatest need was my friendship and keeping him company. I did keep him company often, but now that he's not with us, I feel that I didn't do that as often as I should. I feel sorry about that.

Carol: On Women of Hope today we've been talking about elderly parents. We've heard from several of our team members. The next person to share with us about her parents is Lois. Welcome Lois.

Lois: Thanks Carol.

Carol: I understand your father died recently.

Lois: Yes. The past few weeks have been difficult ones for my family. It doesn't matter how old you are, it's always a sad time when your father or mother dies. This happened for me just a few months ago. My father, who was 90 years old and very frail, passed away in a nursing home. He and my mother, who is 89 years old, were married for 67 years. They had a very loving relationship and extended this love to my sister and me, our husbands, the grandchildren and great grandchildren. They also showed a lot of love to their wider family, their neighbours and their church family.

Carol: Do you live near your parents Lois?

Lois: No, sadly, no. As our parents get older most societies expect that the children will take care for their elderly parents and provide for their daily needs, just like they did for us when we were young. However, for many of us this is not possible as we live a long way away. This doesn't mean we don't care about them, it just means we have to find new ways of showing our love and care, and showing how we can honour our parents.

In the weeks of illness before my father's death I visited my parents. I sensed it might be the last time and when I had to go home I said my goodbyes with a heavy heart. I told him again that I loved him and thanked him for being a wonderful father. It was also good to share our faith together and reassure each other that one day we would meet again in heaven where we will have new bodies and there will be no more sickness or tears.

Dad was buried in a beautiful cemetery, surrounded by trees and flowers and the sound of birds. I will never forget looking up and seeing six strong men of the next two generations carry his coffin to his resting place. I felt sad but blessed for having a supportive and loving family. We placed roses on the coffin and little drawings done by the great grandchildren.

Carol: That was a lovely thing to do.

Lois: Later in the day we had a time of celebration for his life where we were able to share our thoughts of our father and grandfather. His 5 grandchildren spoke of a man who inspired them. One spoke of Papa as the one who helped him when his parents separated. He said that Papa had shown him the love of a father when his own father had let him down so badly.

My sister and I must now support our mother in a new way. We need to help her organise her finances and other important things that she might forget to do, or not know how to do. She can't see very well now, and cannot walk easily so she needs help with everyday living.

My mother has also lost her sense of purpose, taking care of my father. She has lost her sense of self-worth and dignity and as so many things in her life are changing, she's become fearful. We need to be very sensitive to listen to her and to what she wants and how she feels – not just make decisions for her.

So we need to be wise and understanding as we care for my mother in her changed circumstances. We are thankful for her faith in Jesus. This gives her peace in these uncertain times.

Fran: It's good to be with you on Women of Hope. I'm Fran and I'm the last of the team to share my story today.

Let me tell you about my two wonderful mothers – my own mother, and my mother-in-law. Both of them lost their mothers when they were small girls, but they learned how to be good mothers by watching other women. But they got old, as we all do.

Tammy: Yes, it happens to all of us doesn't it? So is your mother still living Fran?

Fran: Yes Tammy, she's 97 now, and she lives in a place where she gets good care day and night. I bring wool for her to make blankets for needy people. That keeps her hands busy and she still feels she's useful.

I think the best way I care for her is to visit her often, and we talk together. She loves to hear about her grandchildren and great grandchildren, and she always says, 'How wonderful to see the children following Jesus'. I ask her questions about things that happened throughout her life, and as she tells me, she seems to become young again. She smiles as she remembers how she met my father. I ask her how she felt about those lovely times and also the difficult times, and what they meant to her. I see how she thinks about them and comes to understand what happened, and how God helped her.

This is the way she's getting ready to finish her life. She's making sense of it all, and seeing that her life has been valuable. She sees that God has always been with her, so she's really ready to die and go to be with God. And I'm ready for her to go. We're at peace.

Tammy: That's a wonderful way to be Fran.

Fran: It was different with my mother-in-law. She got Alzheimer's disease in her early 70s, and quickly she forgot how to do things, and then she forgot her family and even who she was. She needed to be cared for in a home for people with Alzheimer's, and I was very sad that I couldn't look after her. While she still remembered her old dog, we took him to visit her. That made her happy. We would visit her often, sing old favorite songs, take her for walks by the river while she could still walk, bring her favorite foods, hug her and pray with her. She didn't know who we were during the last years, and I guess she had forgotten about God, but we still knew her and loved her, and so did God. I hope she always knew that someone loved her. When she died we were there, and we were happy that she was at rest, with God.

Carol: It's time to go now. It has been good to be reminded of what a privilege it is to be able to reach out to our elderly parents. Thank you, ladies. We know you have a story as well and we would love to hear from you. You can write to us in care of this station or at TWR Women of Hope.

Our email address is TWRWomenofHope@twr.org. If you missed a program or would like to hear one again, you can visit our website at TWRWomenofHope.org. You can also visit our Facebook page.

Have a great week filled with God's blessings.

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