

# Caring for Yourself While Caring for Aging Parents

By Shannon Ingram



**My first clue** that my 79-year-old mother needed extra help around her apartment beyond the every-other-week visits by her cleaning lady surfaced during a weekend stay with her in the fall of 2001. I was living in Denver, Colorado, working as regional vice president of marketing and account management for Navigant, a large corporate travel management company. With ten people on my staff, hundreds of clients, and several business trips every month, it was a complex job that made it hard to balance my personal and professional life at times.

One of the perks of my job was airline tickets. My husband Gary and I used most of my annual allotment to visit my aging parents in Newport Beach, California. We tried to get to California at least every other month.

On this particular visit without Gary, I noticed that my folks' apartment was very messy. The beds were made, but there were dirty dishes in the kitchen sink and on the stove. A half-full carton of milk was left open on the counter next to the refrigerator, and there were crumbs all over the floor. In the bathroom I couldn't see the countertop underneath the dozens of pill bottles, some without lids, plus sundries, hairbrushes, first aid items, and cosmetics. Soiled clothes were strewn around the floor of the bathroom and bedroom instead of in the empty hamper. All of the wastebaskets were full of trash, and the toilet had not been flushed.

Exasperated, I stormed into the living room, where Mom

sat watching TV with my 82-year-old step dad Jack and screamed, "What is going on here? Why is this place such a dump?" The minute I said it, I knew it was overkill. Mom was too shocked by my behavior to respond. She looked at me like a deer in the headlights.

Instead of pursuing the subject of cleaning house, I simply started cleaning. It took me four hours to wash all the dishes, scrub the floors, vacuum, sweep the patio, clean the bathrooms, bathe and blow-dry their little white poodle, and run a couple of loads of laundry.

My brother and stepsister were living in Southern California. I called them to ask if they had noticed the changes I had seen. Both said yes. We agreed to ask the housekeeper if she or someone she knew could come in twice a week. That seemed to placate Mom and Jack.

I went back to work in Colorado—to the high-anxiety corporate environment that I knew and loved. Two weeks later, my brother called to say that Jack had gone to his ranch in the mountains near Idyllwild for a couple of weeks. That left Mom in the apartment by herself, and my brother was concerned she wasn't eating. He also wondered if she was paying her bills because his wife hadn't been able to help her write checks this month. Unfortunately, he was so busy with his work and young family that he didn't have time to make the half-hour trip to Mom's apartment to see if she was okay.

I am the eldest child and the classic dutiful daughter. When my brother explained his situation, I decided to fly to California for another long weekend with Mom. Gary

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didn't want me to go because he was concerned that I was taking too much time off work. I went anyway. My boss was supportive, but I remember one of my business associates asking me how I could possibly stand up to the stress of juggling long-distance caregiving with the "normal" stress of our everyday work environment. I felt perplexed just thinking about it.

This time, the mess was so bad that a foul odor hit me when Mom opened the front door. The dog had obviously been relieving himself on the furniture, which meant that Mom wasn't taking him out for walks. I hugged her and noticed she had lost weight in the last month. She looked frail. I closed the front door behind me and asked, "When was the cleaning lady here last?"

"Oh, sometime last week I think," she said. "She'll be here again next week."

"I thought she was coming twice a week," I said.

"No, that was too much for us," Mom replied. I could feel my blood starting to boil as the heat rose to redden my face. Yet I couldn't bring myself to confront Mom. I started cleaning immediately while Mom sat at her dining room table, staring out the window, oblivious to the piles of junk mail, newspapers, and dirty dishes in front of her.

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"I thought we could go out to lunch today," Mom said wistfully.

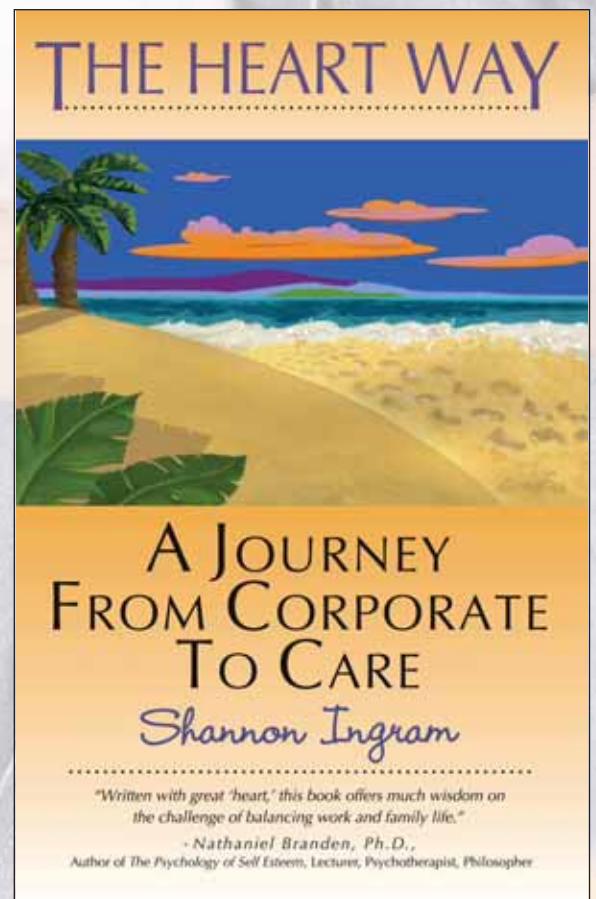
"Only if you take a shower first," I responded. My heart was still pounding as I loaded the dishwasher.

Earlier in the week, my brother had shared with me over the phone that his wife had been helping Mom pay her bills. What he didn't know was that although his wife had written all the checks, had Mom sign them, and then put them in stamped envelopes, Mom was the one responsible for mailing

them. In my quest to clean the apartment after lunch that day, I found a cardboard box in the back of Mom's closet filled with stamped envelopes. She hadn't mailed a check in three months. I asked her why she hadn't mailed the checks, and she said, "I really don't know."

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**Concerned,** I telephoned the family doctor, and he suggested we come in on Monday. I had planned to fly to Denver Monday, but rescheduled to return Tuesday instead.

Long story short, our doctor visit turned into several. The final result was a diagnosis of dementia caused by mini-strokes. Mom had suffered a stroke several years earlier, and had experienced many mini-strokes since then. Her mild cognitive impairment was manifesting in short-term memory loss, lack of interest in personal hygiene, and disorientation. The doctor also recommended that she stop driving. I knew she would need more daily care than a cleaning lady and a partially blind 80-year-old husband could provide.

I hired a caregiver from a local agency and returned to Denver. Now the excitement and minor anxiety of proposal deadlines, client reviews, and marketing communications projects were complicated by the rigors of long-distance caregiving. Mom decided she didn't like the caregiver so she fired her. The apartment complex called me to say Mom hadn't paid the rent. My brother visited and reported that Mom had driven her white SUV into a couple of posts in the carport area, leaving big dents on both sides of the car.

I found myself having to leave important meetings in order to talk with doctors, caregivers, and family members. I had begun having two or three glasses of wine—sometimes a whole bottle—when I got home from work at night. Soon I had moved from wine to two or three

martinis. Gary finally confronted me. "You are a basket case, and becoming an alcoholic is not going to help you fight this battle with your parents," he said. "Why don't you go for a walk in the evening when you get home instead of having those two extra drinks? Better yet, why don't you go talk to your shrink about this? I'm sure other people have gone through what's happening to you, assuming responsibility for aging parents, and you might want to find out what they've learned." He wasn't critical, and his counsel was the spark I needed in order to seek help.

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The prospect of long-distance caregiving was overwhelming. It was the reason I was experiencing high stress at work. I loved my job and didn't want to leave the company because we also needed the money; but I loved my mom too. I bought a couple of books about eldercare and booked a flight to California.

While in California this time, I pondered moving back home to care for my parents. Clearly Mom was not accepting the idea of an unrelated caregiver in her home. My siblings still had young children, which made it tough for them to look after our parents. The stress of long-distance care was taking its toll on my sanity. On the plane back to Colorado, I decided to ask Gary if he would consider moving.

Thankfully, Gary agreed to move. Early in 2003 I left my job to become a full-time caregiver. Over the next two years, I realized how difficult it is for working caregivers to manage even a part-time job, let alone full-time, with the important tasks and flexibility associated with caregiving.

I learned that some of the best solutions to eliminating burnout for working caregivers are the simplest, and yet those solutions generally involve doing something we are not trained to do: Ask for support.

Yoga, meditation, regular exercise, massage therapy, and a quiet hour just for yourself are excellent remedies for anxiety. Busy working caregivers must summon the nerve to ask a relative, friend, boss, or co-worker for support in taking the time to pursue any one of those remedies. If you are having difficulty balancing work and caregiving, consider taking advantage of "Family and Medical Leave" for up to six months a year. Read the Department of Labor's fact sheet on the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993. It can be found online: [www.dol.gov/esa/regs/compliance/whd/whdfs28.htm](http://www.dol.gov/esa/regs/compliance/whd/whdfs28.htm).

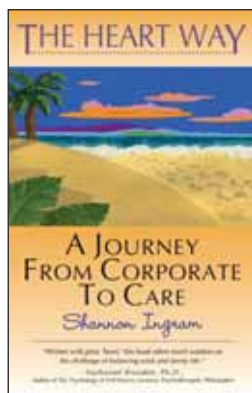
“ *Yoga, meditation, regular exercise, massage therapy, and a quiet hour just for yourself are excellent remedies for anxiety.* ”

If you or someone who loves you thinks you may be losing sight of your own well-being by trying to balance caregiving and work, take the American Medical Association's "Caregiver Self-Assessment Questionnaire." The test can be found online at [www.ama-assn.org/ama/upload/mm/36/caregivertooleng.pdf](http://www.ama-assn.org/ama/upload/mm/36/caregivertooleng.pdf).

Check out local resources, and consider joining a support group in your area (see listings elsewhere in this issue) or through your church. Sometimes the best support comes from empathic people who share your experience.

What's the best thing I learned? Repeat this affirmation daily until you truly embrace it: ***I now allow others to love and support me.*** I have discovered that allowing others to love and support me balances out the care that I give and makes me feel whole.

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