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“Good Enough”

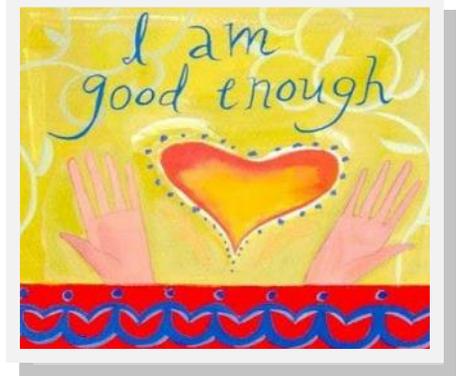
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If we define caregiving as “care partnering” to a loved one, then the best caregiver is not the one who cares most, and certainly not the one who cares least, but the one who cares just the right amount. That is the caregiver Goldilocks would have picked, if she had had three different care partners to choose from along with the different bowls of porridge. It’s the one most of us would pick if we always had the ability to choose.

With that said, there comes a time when each of us realizes that maybe we are no longer the fiercely independent, self-sufficient person we once were when we were younger. It is about this same time that we recognize that mutual caring is an important aspect of aging.

However, with a progressive dementia we find that we must examine our “mental rules” or “pre-set expectations” of what it means to partner in caring, as this will have a big impact on how we actually care for and react to a person with dementia. It is important to examine our mental rules of what we see as the best caregiver, and perhaps, restructure these rules. Resetting expectations is vital not only in maintaining a sense of self-care, but it affects the care recipient’s independence and dignity as he becomes more dependent on you.

When your loved one is living with



dementia, changing your perception of your relationship will be more radical than any other care giving situation. With your partner’s cognitive losses that will erode your relationship, perceived “perfection” is not a realistic goal. Instead of trying to make the relationship what we perceive as “perfect” it would be better to shift to a new value—“good enough.”

As our population ages, and the number of people over 50 increases, professionals and family members alike must allow for (and not judge) the “good enough” value system as applied to marriage and family relationships. In our world of always striving for perceived perfection, it can be difficult to accept that the idea that good enough might be the best outcome for a care partner. But when you love and care for someone with dementia, it is important to emphasize the outcome of the good enough relationship. Acceptance of good enough is manifest in more contentedness and happiness in your moments together.

Most of us can’t avoid some of the immutable rules that are always in our head: “To show people I love them, I must



Tips & Tools

The good enough caregiver . . .

. . . does not strive to be what he perceives as “perfect” and does not expect “perfection” from his loved one

. . . respects her loved one and tries to understand him for who he is now

. . . is most concerned for his loved one’s current experiences

. . . provides the assistance that her loved one needs and wants, but not more or less than what is safe

. . . has the tools to care with deliberate reflection, maturity, and empathy.

...is confident that their “good enough” caregiving *is* good enough.

cook for them” or “Efficiency is next to Godliness.” Most of the time these rules are helpful in life. It ensures wonderful meals with friends and family, and allows us to accomplish our goals quickly. But sometimes these rules can interfere with our lives, especially if we worry too much about being our perceived “perfect” care partner to one with dementia. Even though we might know better, letting go of an age-old precept is not easy.

Even more challenging, people with dementia often seem to operate outside the usual rules of society and they lose their ability to be rational in their behavior. We may become judgmental, or may focus on and amplify every blemish, including those that we can do nothing about. It may be better, perhaps, to become flexible and creative with our pre-set expectations. The first step in doing this is to identify and recognize the mental rule that guides us, and then logically work through what would happen if the rule were to be broken. Would it be catastrophic if Mom’s socks don’t match? Usually not.

Our own expectations of what it is to be a good care partner will more than likely create unnecessary stress. For example, in struggling to get your loved one with dementia to shower every day, you will both start to dread shower time and distress both of you. Adapting your own routine to make each day less stressful is a good first step toward re-setting care expectations. If bath time is always before bed it might be better to schedule this task when your loved one is most alert and refreshed. Make it fun

with soft music or soft lights, perhaps skip a day occasionally. Take your time, and acknowledge that accomplishing things may take longer than it used to.

Remember it is ok not to shower every day, and that you aren’t slacking on responsibilities if this

happened. Showering once a week and sponging clean in the sink the other days will be good enough. By resetting your expectations within the routine will allow for spontaneous interactions, and perhaps even create some humor and joy.

Each person with dementia will experience his symptoms and progression differently, therefore care giving techniques must vary as well. Try tailoring the good enough to your loved one’s individual needs. Remember, your loved one’s responses and behaviors might be different from what they used to be. Patience and flexibility—along with good self-care and the support of friends and family—can help you deal with the challenges and frustrations ahead.

Actively making the choice to view your relationship in a new light should not be seen as “settling” or “surrendering,” but rather as choosing a perspective that better fits the circumstances. If you change the bar, you don’t have to feel you are failing. If you let go of your former precepts of what the ideal care partner must be, you are freed from a standard that you can no longer realistically meet. Then you will be free to find satisfaction in the care giving relationship that fits you and your loved one best.

it's all good.