

Being the Best Caregiver You Can Be

THE ROLE OF EDUCATION

Patti Schnettler
Caregiver

In Wisconsin there are over 196,000 individuals caring for a loved one living with Alzheimer's or dementia. Caregiving doesn't come with an instruction manual, but there are resources to support those on this journey. Patti Schnettler is caring for her husband Bill, who is 67 and living with dementia. Even though Bill has a family history of dementia, recognizing the signs wasn't easy. Bill had a stroke in 2009, and while he recovered, over the years the family noticed some changes. Bill had heightened anxiety, personality change and in most recent year's, memory and speech issues. Patti took him to a geriatric doctor and he was diagnosed with dementia and likely early onset Alzheimer's.

Impact of Education

"One of the first things I did after Bill's diagnosis was to log on to alz.org," Patti shared. "There are so many resources available online. You have to carve out the time to educate yourself. You're doing it for yourself to learn how to be a better caregiver."

One class that had an impact on Patti was the Savvy Caregivers Workshop. It is a six-week program designed for family caregivers of individuals with dementia who continue to live at home. "It was a very comprehensive class," Patti shared. "Each of the six weeks builds on different topics. Every week you have assignments, one of which is always to take time for yourself. One thing I learned in the class is you can only take one day at a time."

"Bill and I have five children, Patti said. "I tell them to enjoy what you can with dad. We made a point to go on a beach vacation this year. Scheduling and taking that time was something I had control over. I made a point to relax and it was a huge relief to just focus on the moment and not worry about next week or next year."

"The virtual programs and online opportunities offered by the Alzheimer's Association have been wonderful," said Patti. "Especially the chats have been very helpful (alzconnected.org). There are chats for so many topics – I'm a sibling, I'm new to being a caregiver, I need advice on finances. It's amazing to follow the conversations and get in touch with others on this journey. I've learned so much."

While Bill has lost some words, he is still very independent. They own their own business and Bill still goes in to work and drives. But a slow transition is happening with Patti taking over more business and household management that Bill previously did. Patti and Bill continue to take things one day at a time, and Bill is planning to participate in dementia research in Madison to help those on a similar journey.

