

Q & A: "AN ELDERLY PARENT LIVING WITH YOU?"

"QUESTION: My wife's 92-year-old father moved in with us 3 years ago after his wife died. While it's a blessing for my father-in-law and my wife, I'm struggling. My selfish side sees me as second place to her father. We have little private time and few dates. We do most everything together--at Dad's speed. How do I see my way through this circumstance?"

"ANSWER: This is a difficult situation. If you say anything you can come across like a needy, selfish, and immature child. Yet because you care for your wife and your marriage you have to say something.

"It's usually a challenge for at least one partner to leave and cleave at the beginning of a marriage. It's an entirely different challenge when you've become a caretaker for an elderly parent who's in poor health and in need of constant attention.

"One of the hazards of caring for an elderly parent is that it's easy to become so focused on his/her needs that over time all family activities are determined by how it will affect the parent. The caretaker can lose perspective on how it's affecting her life and her marriage.

"We encourage you to follow Paul's advice in Ephesians 4:15 to 'speak the truth in love.' After eliciting prayer support by discussing the situation with your pastor and perhaps some of your wife's friends, prayerfully look for a time when you are alone with her.

"Make sure it's not at the end of a long day, when she's tired. Tell her you have something important to say that you'd like her to think and pray about. Make sure she knows you aren't looking for or needing an immediate response so she won't feel pressured. She's already feeling more than enough pressure.

"Then when you get together, hold her hands, open with a short prayer, look in her eyes, and share your version of this statement: 'Honey, I love you and I want a great marriage and a great family. And right now that includes your dad. I want to support you in caring for your dad just as I'd want you to support me if it were my mom or dad.

"However, what we're doing isn't working. I'm concerned about you; I'm concerned about us, and I'm concerned about our family and how we can more effectively meet everyone's needs, including yours. I don't have all the answers but I know we need someone to help us step back and gain a fresh perspective. The better we are for each other, the better we can be for those we love. Would you consider going with me to meet with a counselor who has experience working with couples who've had a parent move in with them?"

Most of the individuals who have approached the situation like this have had a positive response from their spouse. They've gone on to discover support and resources they had not been aware of. Another option is that many communities have support groups for couples who are caring for an elderly parent. We'd encourage you to see if one is available in your community."

Article written by: Jerry & Sylvia Taylor