

Caregiving Begins with Self

By Beth Albaneze, CTRS, CPRP, CLP

- I was on an airplane not long ago, buckled in my seat, waiting to take off. The flight attendant began the pre-flight lecture, which many of us have heard so many times that it barely registers anymore. Then, she recited that part about how, in an emergency, we should place an oxygen mask over our own noses and mouths before assisting other passengers with their masks.



That instruction, it occurred to me, is one that women should heed — not just on airplanes, but every day.

Women instinctively tend to care for others first. We will run ourselves ragged to get our children to their after-school activities and the dog to the vet, but forget to shower. We ignore our own doctors' advice while we take our aging parents hither and yon to see specialists three times a week.

But, the painful truth is that if we don't take care of ourselves first, we won't be *able* to provide good care for anyone else. Caregivers can easily become overwhelmed, angry, resentful, and even immobilized, which can make them a liability, rather than an asset, to the person in their care.

Self-care becomes even more important to remember when regularly helping a loved one in need, whether it's a child with a developmental issue, a teenager with emerging mental health problem, or a parent who needs elder care but can't afford it, to name a few examples.

It is well documented that family members who provide care to those with chronic or disabling conditions are at risk for emotional and physical health problems. The Family Caregiver Alliance reports that an estimated 40 to 70 percent of caregivers have

clinically significant symptoms of depression, with 25 to 50 percent meeting the criteria for major depression.

These issues disproportionately affect women, because we outnumber men three to one when it comes to acting as unpaid family caregivers, and we spend 50 percent more time than men when engaged in caregiving.

So what should women do?

First and foremost, don't shoulder the entire load alone; share the stresses and responsibilities as much as possible. For some, that will mean seeing a therapist to provide both perspective and a confidential outlet to discuss difficult family matters. Others may wish to engage a relative or family friend, or even hire a paraprofessional to sit with the loved one in need for a few hours a week, just to give the caregiver a breather. My company can provide ideas and help, too. With good support, self-care doesn't have to fall by the wayside.

That support is your oxygen mask. Take a deep breath.

Located in the suburbs of Washington, D.C., House Calls was founded in 2004 by Beth Albaneze, a certified therapeutic recreation specialist and psychiatric rehabilitation practitioner with more than 40 years of experience. For more information, call (301) 346-6732 or visit www.CallingOnBeth.net.