Elder care needs more attention in the workplace

The decline of an elderly loved one may occur suddenly through a massive stroke or disabling accident. Or it may unravel slowly, like watching a train wreck in your way in slow motion. I fell into the latter category with my mother.

The first sign was her phone being disconnected. She was the name of the company. ‘I didn’t see the bill.’ Two years after it had become Verizon she was still using that excuse. She repeated the same stories over and over. When she couldn’t find something, she was sure my brother had stolen it. She drove her car through her garage door. ‘It was just an accident,’ she said.

Finally she became confused when she went shopping and had to call the police. They wouldn’t let her drive. Her license, insurance, registration and inspection had expired. She never drove again. All the while she insisted she was fine and would not go into assisted living.

Her hoarding ballooned to sickening proportions. Even if we proposed sending someone to visit her, where would they sit? If she agreed to move, how could she let go of all her stuff? She managed to survive through the kindness of neighbors and Meals on Wheels. I was in New York City freaking out by the time she was in Greensboro praying to the Lord. She was in Richmond getting angrier and loopier by the day. I started praying, too.

Variations of this scenario are played out every day and will only become worse as baby boomers age. Its impact goes far beyond those immediately affected. American businesses lose as much as $34 billion each year due to employees’ need to care for loved ones 50 years of age and older. Ten percent of employed caregivers go from full-time to part-time jobs because of their caregiving responsibilities. And if an elderly person’s home falls into disrepair and sells for a lot less than it should, it brings down the value of all the houses in the neighborhood.

My crisis, fortunately, had a happy ending. I moved to the Triad, was able to do some work from home, and thanks to divine intervention (there’s simply no other way to describe it) downsized my mother’s house and moved her in with me. I not only discovered a vibrant new life here, but a loving relationship with my mother and brother that I never had. It was, however, all-consuming and unbelievably stressful. As her health declined, my sense of helplessness and grief escalated. There was no way I could have worked a full-time job outside the home.

Most businesses have clearly defined parameters for family emergencies and maternity leave. But elder care can go on for years. If you are an employer, have patience and compassion if an employee is dealing with this. If you are in this situation, search “senior resources” on the Internet or in the Yellow Pages. Many are free. I used the Adult Center for Enrichment and a local church that provided elder day care.

For professional help in downsizing a house, turn to the National Association of Senior Move Managers for someone with experience in the delicate process. If you’re an outsider, help in whatever way you can from home repairs to sitting with the elderly person while the caregiver runs errands. It may be far more interesting than you thought if you listen to their stories.

In the end, that’s all we have.

Jo Maeder, who lives in Oak Ridge, is the author of "When I Married My Mother" (Da Capo Press), which was released in May and available in bookstores and online, or visit www.jomaeder.com.

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