

Dear Dr. Sloan:

I need advice on providing care and support for my elderly, ailing husband of 57 years. I do have a caregiver three times a week for three hours and my children help out when they can. Most of the time, I care for him by myself and many times I feel overwhelmed and very stressed. What can I do? Signed: At Wit's End.

Dear Wit's End:

The care of a spouse certainly has its problems and its rewards. One advantage is that the partner who is in need of care is already comfortable with you as a caregiver. Most assuredly, by now you know each other's idiosyncracies, habits and preferences. You also know each other intimately so it eases any embarrassment when dealing with private needs. You are aware of what areas in your home might be in question when it comes to safety issues. You may feel guilty about asking others for much needed assistance, and probably fear that your husband will be uncomfortable or embarrassed if anyone knows that he needs care. Caregivers, such as yourself, living with your husband, often feel added stress because there is not much provision for physical or emotional breaks.

It is important that you continue to do some of the activities you enjoy, such as an outing with friends for a casual lunch or attending a weekly writers' group or some similar activity. You must give yourself a breather. It is important that you don't assume you can handle everything. Sometimes even the most resourceful person needs to ask for more help from family members and outside professionals.

I would suggest that you try to increase the hours that your caregiver is with your husband, and perhaps ask your children if they could take on more responsibility. You might ask your doctor to request an evaluation from a hospice. I understand that hospice can be of assistance in the long term care of a patient. I believe that hospice doesn't always mean that the patient is terminal or looking at approximately six more months of life.

In the end, it is extremely important that you maintain your own health, because if you aren't well, you will be much less able to help your spouse.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote in her Sonnets from the Portuguese: How do I love thee? Let me count the ways. The task of caring for an ailing husband certainly could be added as one more important dimension. Truly, it is a labor of love. Good luck and take care of you.