

# Naked Grandpa or When you *must* ask for help from professionals

I'll never forget the evening I went to Grandpa's house and a dozen of us were sitting around the dining room table. Usually, we ate in the living room, where Grandpa lived.

"Why are you all eating in here?" I asked.  
"Cuz Grandpa's naked," my brother answered.  
"Oh, how long has he been without clothes?"  
"Most of the afternoon."

Taking care of a loved one at home brings challenges and joy. But it naturally disrupts life, especially as the last days approach. It's not uncommon for people at the end of their lives to want to shed their clothing. Heavier levels of care, increasing dementia and a strong desire to be naked were signs that Grandpa was near the end and needed professional care. As a family, however, nothing had prepared us for this final challenge.

Over those final days at home, family and friends came and went. Some gave help and support to my aunt, who had taken on the primary caregiver role. Others simply visited Grandpa. We never knew who was coming for meals, and it didn't matter. The welcome sign was up. "You are all family. You're

all welcome here. The freezer is full of food. Eat."

Some evenings were planned, like the ones where Dad got out the slide projector and embarrassed all of us with those dorky pictures from the '70s and '80s. We'd point at each other, commenting on the bad haircuts, tube socks with shorts or stirrup pants with huge, oversized shoulder-padded sweaters.

Some nights, I'd get apologetic calls from my aunt at two a.m. "He needs a typewriter." Or, "Where would I find his slide rule?" We'd also get middle-of-the-night calls to help transfer Grandpa to the nearby commode. Occasionally, it required calling my dad for help, just so Grandpa could, as he said, "Go Number Two."

Eventually, however, we all needed to face up to the simple facts of his last days: We could no longer do for him what he needed done. Thankfully, the Hospice professionals gave us the nudge we needed to look at the strain we were taking on and make an informed decision that would help

us take care of ourselves and still be a part of Grandpa's care.

Just not as the 24-hour care providers.

It was a bittersweet move-in day. Grandpa didn't want to leave his home and, of course,

that made it harder on us. Like many families, we wanted to take care of him until his death. But how do you put your life on hold to become a full-time caregiver? We have to go to work, take care of children and attend church meetings. And many of us aren't trained — or emotionally prepared — to bathe, change Depends or handle behavioral outbursts.

When someone enters a nursing home near the end of life, it can be a rough change. Nevertheless, as family caregivers, we have to know when to ask for help. Part of that involves accepting that "the professionals" aren't perfect. They are, however, professionals. To their credit, they don't have the emotional triggers we have. They don't remember Grandpa sitting at the head of the dinner table, spinning fiction into facts, barking out orders and drinking too much. They don't remember a man who was larger than life.

What they see, and what pulls at our heartstrings, is an old man, needing the same help we give babies. They see a dying man, unwilling to keep clothes on and transitioning to the next life. Without the emotional encumbrances that make families family, they can take on the tasks that, in those last days, become simply too emotionally draining for family to endure.

When the disruptions become too intense, ask for help. And resolve to work with the professionals, rather than scold them for not doing enough or not caring for a loved one as we would.

What your loved one needs is your presence. Sometimes that's easier to give when you're not doing the heavy caregiving yourself.

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