



Caring for the Caregiver

Recognizing Feelings



Caring for a chronically ill person can provoke deep and often surprising feelings. Some of the most difficult feelings caregivers have to face are:

- intense, lingering grief because a loved one is no longer able to play an important and loving part in their lives.
- deep, protective love coexisting with anger and resentment, perhaps even the wish that the person would die.
- guilt over their feelings and over the feeling of not having successfully dealt with the patient's needs.

When we judge these feelings as unacceptable, we may unconsciously try to hide them.

Common defenses against such feelings include blaming, moralizing, denying, self-pity, pretending, attacking, withdrawing, projecting, sarcasm or alcohol and drug abuse. When feelings are masked in this way, our inner peace is destroyed. The first step in unmasking and healing feelings is to:

Recognize that feelings are neither good nor bad.

To explore your feelings and defenses, allow yourself 15 minutes to relax. Try a stress reduction technique, such as deep breathing or progressive muscle relaxation. Then ask these questions:

- What messages is my body giving me right now about my feelings?
- What defenses am I using to disguise my feelings?
- When I let go of these defenses, what feelings come up?
- What caregiving activities trigger these feelings?
- Who can I turn to when I need to share these feelings?