

How to Build an Energy Team or ‘Caregiver Group’ to help Adult Children Juggle Life with a Newly Widowed Parent

(Q & A with authors Jamieson Haverkamp and Sheila Warnock)

After the loss of a parent or if your surviving parent has a chronic illness, it is helpful to have a system or structure available to build a support group around your loved one to relieve yourself of the easily overwhelming duties of caregiving.

This month I asked Sheila Warnock, Founder & President, [ShareTheCaregiving](#), Inc. and co-author, *Share The Care, How To Organize a Group to Care For Someone Who Is Seriously Ill* (Simon & Schuster, Fireside Books, 1995, 2004) to provide a few helpful hints on how to build this group of support for adults with a newly widowed parent and what pitfalls to avoid.

JH: When an adult child first realizes they need outside help in assisting a newly widowed parent, what is the first thing they need to do to assemble support team or “caregiver group”? How soon after loss do you think this should take place?

SW: GET EVERYONE ON THE SAME PAGE AS SOON AS POSSIBLE. A family discussion with your siblings and newly widowed parent will enable your family to honestly determine what kind of assistance is needed, who in the community might help and how fast you need to get organized.

It’s crucial to recognize if your parent will need a great deal of support, or if they can do well just cushioned with loving practical and emotional backing for a few weeks or months. If a parent needs constant companionship and physical care other options may need to be considered with input from his or her physician.

The key is to agree support is needed. A parent might resist allowing others to help fearing loss of independence, being perceived as a burden, or that they could never reciprocate.

Be sensitive to your widowed parent’s feelings and make sure they understand that having an Energy Team or Group will be a blessing for them as well as for their adult children who may live at a distance or who have demanding business or other family commitments. It’s helpful to reassure a parent that individuals who offer help will gain all kinds of personal rewards in return.

WHO SHOULD BE INVOLVED

Should a parent be too emotionally distraught to make decisions, then it’s up to the adult children. Including close relatives or friends of the family in the meeting could be helpful—especially if the adult children have little knowledge of their widowed parent’s friends, neighbors and community.

TIMING

The sooner you can start to organize the better. Too often families wait until things reach a crisis before accepting or asking for assistance resulting in enormous pressures for the friends, relatives and neighbors who have to scramble to make it happen on short notice.

Use your judgment and move things forward gently if your widowed parent is still in a very fragile emotional state following the loss of their lifetime partner.

NO COOKIE CUTTER ANSWERS

Every family is unique and each requires choices that work for their individual needs and circumstances. It’s wise to trust your instincts.

JH:What is the best way for people to determine what tasks to do themselves and what to delegate to others.

SW: First create a list of needs and prioritize. Decide what you're good at doing and what jobs will require your personal involvement. Then, at your meeting ask everyone who is going to be a part of the Team to rate themselves on the various jobs that need doing. (See Individual Data Forms on www.sharethecare.org You'll need to fill-in the jobs on page 2) These forms are designed to collect contact information, availabilities, and uncover needed talents, expertise and skills available within a Share The Care™ group.

JH:What are the common pitfalls that make a support team (or family members supporting the widowed parent) fall apart?

SW:

Not sharing responsibilities

Lack of communication

Lack of trust

One person attempting to run everything with a “*My way or the highway*” attitude.

A successful support team is built on mutual respect, cooperation, and teamwork using agreed upon guidelines. Members of your team need to be able to say, “*yes, I can handle that,*” as well as “*No, I prefer to do another job.*”

Get money issues handled up front. How will expenses be covered or reimbursed? Someone needs to take charge of reimbursements, collecting receipts and tracking expenses. If your parent has very limited funds, a group could hold a fundraiser.

Note: If your group starts having problems (after a long period of success) investigate to learn if there been dramatic changes with your parent that need to be addressed? Has he or she become so frail they need round-the-clock care? Has some dementia set in? If so, it's time for the family and team to meet again, to determine what's going on, acknowledge the changes, and make adjustments. If there's a serious decline or health issue the family will need to determine next steps with their parent's physician.

JH: What is essential to keep the support group for the family working and motivated to continue?

SW: Matching people's skills to the jobs that allow them to feel productive, useful, and successful. Ask them to tell you how they can best serve.

Remember to thank and acknowledge the group's efforts. A few meaningful words of appreciation will go a long way especially after they've been managing a long or very difficult job.

Working side-by-side, group members often develop close friendships and as a result a special “energy” seems to emanate from the group. Often outsiders, who don't even know the person being supported, are so taken by what they're doing that they want to join and become a part the group effort. So, it's possible your team, may even grow over time.

JH: If a widowed parent is ill, how does this intensify the demands on the family and what is essential for adult children to do to preserve their own health and life balance in that particular situation?

SW: More often than not, sole family caregivers become isolated, depressed and quite ill themselves. Having one's whole world revolve around just caregiving is emotionally, spiritually, and physically draining. As caregivers, you want to remember to put *your own health and*

responsibilities first. Make time for your family. Eat right, exercise, spend time in nature, and take breaks to enjoy things that bring you joy.

Be sure to let people in your world know what you're doing so they understand the responsibilities you're carrying and can give you a break, and offer some encouragement. And if you need to seek out professional counseling...do it.

Truly "being there" for one's parent has its rewarding moments too. Team backup will allow you quiet, quality time with your mom or dad providing you with the space for healing and discovery. It's truly possible to come out the other side of this life experience stronger, wiser and more appreciative of life.

JH: In your book, Share The Care, you talk about The Seven Principles© for Caregivers which I think also apply to adult children with a newly widowed parent. Do you think these apply to adults with a newly widowed parent as well, and which principle in particular and why?

SW: The Seven Principles© definitely apply to any situation where a caregiver or a family cannot carry the load—from serious illness to a temporary injury, to a grandparent raising small children, to a family with newborn quadruplets.

The most important principle is:

Principle #1 – Sharing Responsibility is the Key to Not Burning Out.

Our society has idealized independence and being a "super mom" or "super dad" who can do it all. I think we're beginning to realize one pays a great personal price to keep this myth alive.

Life today is extremely challenging; families are split up and live in different parts of the country; our health care system is complicated and costly; our aging population is growing rapidly just as our economy is sinking into a deeper recession.

It's my belief if we're to make it through everything before us and create a better world we're going to have to learn to help one another. Working together in a support team gives us a place to learn compassion and realize the value of our small acts of kindness. And it doesn't cost anything.

JH: Where should adult children look in their community for people to build their support team?

SW: When a widowed parent has few living friends or relatives nearby, this becomes a very relevant question. There is no magic bullet response, however, there are people in the community who can and want to lend a hand. You just have to find them—so ask for suggestions or referrals.

Churches, synagogues, and temples are known for having volunteer programs. Retirees with time on their hands and a lifetime of experience make great recruits. Other places you might look include: clubs, community centers, and unions, past places of employment, as well as your own friends and their spouses or significant others.

Ask a group member to research on-line for all available FREE support your parent might be eligible to receive. Contact local non-profits, the Department of Aging, Meals on Wheels, or if your parent suffers from a specific illness connect with the local chapter (i.e. American Cancer Society, or the Alzheimer's Association) for support, guidance and information.

If you live out of state, consulting with a geriatric care manager could save a lot of time and worry if your team is very small or your widowed parent's needs are complicated.

BIOS

JAMIESON HAVERKAMPF,

Author of the multi-award winning resource guide—***Mom Minus Dad: The Essential Resource Guide for Busy Adults with a Newly Widowed Parent***, the only resource guide available for adults with a newly widowed parent that covers 10 major parent loss issues and lists and describes more than 500 useful resources. Visit: www.momminusdad.com for a FREE report “Top Ten Tips for Busy Adults with a Newly Widowed Parent”

SHEILA WARNOCK,

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Co-author of *Share The Care* has combined her life experiences as a three-time caregiver, co-author and lecturer with her creative and advertising background skills to create the materials and programs the organization uses to carry out its mission.

Her unique perspective on caregiving comes from having been a solitary caregiver for her mother and part of the original **SHARE THE CARE™** group for a friend with terminal cancer and yet again, years later, she spearheaded a group for her late co-author.

Sheila’s dream is that people everywhere involved in making caregiving decisions will consider the **SHARE THE CARE™** model as a viable and rewarding option for everyone involved.