

Social Work



Geriatric Social Work: A Caregiver's Perspective

When we got the news my mother had lung cancer, we were devastated. She is the centerpiece of our family. At 78 years old she's always volunteering to help with family parties and baking her famous cookies. My sister lives in Florida, so my husband and I eagerly took on the role of getting Mom to her appointments and chemotherapy treatments.

The doctor says Mom is doing well, but we are all starting to notice the mail piling up, the dirty dishes in the sink, and a mess in a once immaculate home. It's clear she needs more help at home. I want to be the one to help her, but I also want to be available to help my children with homework and attend their basketball and soccer games. I've tried to talk to Mom about getting some extra help, but she's always resistant to the idea and we end up arguing.

One day at treatment, Mom's chemotherapy nurse was asking how she was managing at home. Mom, as usual, said she was doing fine. I pulled the nurse aside later and explained that things were not going as well as Mom had said, and we all were starting to notice she could use some extra help. The nurse suggested we speak with the geriatric oncology social worker for the Geriatric Oncology Program. I was hesitant at first because I didn't think Mom needed a social worker, and I didn't want to upset her more. The nurse said she would just have the social worker "stop by" to talk to with us.

When the social worker came over, she spoke directly to my mom and my mom seemed to really like her. At first, Mom said everything was fine, but after a few minutes she admitted she was having more problems. The social worker talked to Mom and me about all the support services at the Joan Karnell Cancer Center and about services Mom could get at home. At the end of our meeting, Mom actually agreed to the extra help, and the social worker made the referral. I can't believe the difference it's made. Mom seems happier and I am able to get to school without worrying if Mom's ok.

We're having my son's birthday party this weekend and Mom has volunteered to bake the cake!

For more information about Social Work services or the Geriatric Oncology Program, please contact Dana DeDonato, MSW, LSW at 215.829.6379 or visit PennMedicine.org/Karnell.