

John and Martha: The Joy of Family

John considered himself a family man. His life in Calgary was busy and, usually, rewarding. He had been happily married to his wife Sara for 18 years and they loved to travel whenever they could. They were as involved in their 14 year old son's life as much as possible; Chris had just entered high school and was in and out of the house at all hours of the day and night. John also worked long hours as a manager at a local oil company. In short, he was acutely aware that many people depended on him.

Amidst this already hectic schedule, John's 74 year old mother Martha was diagnosed with dementia. John, Sara, and Martha believed deeply that children should support their aging parents, so Martha moved into her son's home as her condition progressed. Sometimes John or Sara took time off work to care for Martha, gradually doing so more often. Though their employers had been understanding, John and Sara were worried this would change. John's 3 siblings were usually too busy to help out, as was Chris. John and Sara felt stretched thin with so many demands on their time; all of this stress was beginning to take a toll on their marriage as they tried to find time for each other as well.

Despite their challenging situation, John and Sara felt they were managing well until Martha's behavior suddenly changed. She was going downhill so quickly; wandering at night despite being afraid of the dark, becoming angry and paranoid, refusing to shower, and hallucinating that she had super-strength. She was no longer using her walker, the hand rail on the stairs, or the bathroom aides, but she desperately needed them. As she moved shakily around the house, John's fear that she would fall skyrocketed.

When his distress became too much to bear, John called Health Link for advice while Martha was taking a nap; her paranoia meant he couldn't call while she was awake. Health Link referred him to the Dementia Advice Service, and a nurse promptly called him back that day. She listened sympathetically as John described the situation, carefully probing for more information, and quickly realized that Martha needed more support than this busy family could provide. She referred him to Home Care, the Alzheimer Society's Dementia Connect program, suggested they see Martha's family doctor about her new symptoms, and gave him tips for managing her behaviour.

John's shaky voice, tearful account, and intense fear that his mother's sudden decline could further hurt his marriage and job worried the dementia nurse. She used several questionnaires to gauge John's mental health and stress from caregiving, determining that he was at a high risk for depression. Her final referral was to John's own family doctor, and with his permission she faxed her assessment to the doctor's office.

The DA nurse called John three more times to see how things were going. He was able to acquire homecare first, reducing the time he and Sara took off work. Martha's doctor adjusted her medications

shortly after, and she became less angry. John put a bell on her bedroom door to prevent her from wandering at night, and found it easier to handle her behaviors using the nurse's advice. He also saw his own doctor, and was diagnosed with depression. Through counselling and medication, his depression slowly improved over the course of his conversations with the DA nurse, as did his results on the questionnaires. He eventually joined a support group through Dementia Connect as well – though he'd felt this was a lower priority than his mother's care, the nurse had continued to encourage him to get in touch with Dementia Connect until he'd done so.

John felt in control of his life once again – though certainly not less busy! The DA nurse's care and concern had helped him to find the supports he needed at a time when he was not able to find them himself. He had also begun thinking about the future, discussing placement options and timing with Home Care and Martha's family doctor. In the meantime, he was overjoyed to continue caring for his mother in their family home.