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Pill Daze

by Barbara Strakele

LIVING WITH ALZHEIMERS

"Why are you asking me again? Didn't you hear what I just finished telling you?" Bob was getting annoyed about my lack of attention during our conversations. With his monthly rotating schedule between Europe and home, he was in a good position to observe changes in Mom and in me; changes which were happening gradually, without my noticing. It was his idea to get away on a vacation, just the two of us.



Moving Forward, by Diane M. Soule

This Caribbean cruise was to be our first vacation in two years; the first vacation since Mom came to live with us. Preparing for her nine day stay in a respite center during our absence became a bigger chore than I had ever imagined. I packed her clothing and personal grooming items, but the last minute organizing of our medicines, Mom's and mine, unglued me.

Vitamins, calcium, medications for blood pressure, menopause and anxiety. Mom's. Mine. AM.& PM. Thursday pill for osteoporosis to be taken after fasting. Don't take with antacids. Avoid sunning. Take before bed only. Don't drive or operate machinery. Hers. Mine.

I was alone in the house and positioned myself at the cleared-off dining room table with no visual distractions and no background noise. There were two small buckets of prescriptions on the table and four weekly pill-pack containers to cover nine days for each of us.

Mom's pills had to cover the Saturday we left, then another full week, then Sunday through Monday morning before we picked her up. So nine days really encompassed the end of week one, the entirety of week two and the beginning of week three.

For the first fifteen minutes I stared at the collection of white and orange medicine bottles and tried to figure out why I couldn't get nine days of pills into fourteen days worth of space. I was already confused and I hadn't even begun. The mental strain of trying to figure out which containers to use unnerved me. I needed to take a break and have a cup of tea.

My Earl Gray failed to remove me from the pressures of the job at hand. I was still faced with a cornucopia of medicines which could either help or harm one or both of us, depending on how well I sorted them. I had lost all confidence in my ability to handle the task.

The Art & Alzheimer's Project

The Cape & Islands Art & Alzheimer's Initiative sponsored by Alzheimer's Services of Cape Cod brings art and conversation into the lives of individuals living with memory impairment. Space is limited to five couples per group session.

Cape Cod Museum of Art, Dennis

3rd Monday of every month from 1 – 2:30pm

Register each month with Linda McNeill-Kemp 1 508 385 4477

For further participating art galleries contact Suzanne Faith at: suzanne@alzcapecod.org Suzanne Faith or telephone: 508 775 5656.

I was sure the order was placed at the last minute because her prescription plan had changed in January, and the new company had to send me an application form instead of accepting my phone request for a refill. Then they had refused to discuss my mother's medications with me because they didn't have a copy of Mom's privacy release.

"For Pete's sake!" I argued. "She's 86 years old and has Alzheimer's disease! Can't you tell that from the medication she's on? Do you want me to put her on the phone to answer your questions?"

The robot-like response was that they had to follow policy. I had been so overwhelmed and aggravated that I hadn't followed my own policy of keeping lists of which medications needed MD approval, which were available at the local drug store, and which needed to be ordered by mail or were awaiting delivery.

As I painstakingly filled the pill-packs, I noticed that one of the pills looked different from the last order. Why didn't the five morning pills for Friday and Saturday look the same? Was this because the refill was from a different generic brand or did I mix them up? My chest was tightening and my eyes were becoming heavy.

My arms plopped down on the heavy wooden table. All motion stopped. Where do I go from here? Should I separate them all by color, put them back into the bottles and start over? Did I use my blood pressure dosage instead of Mom's? Why can't I organize this? The enormity of what was yet to be done was weighing on my chest. The clock was ticking and there were still other chores that I needed to complete.

On the verge of tears, I knew I couldn't put this off. I had to keep at it. Trying a new approach, I lined up all of her RX bottles in alphabetical order; Aricept, Ativan, Amlodipine, Actonel, baby aspirin. Two bottles of Glimipiride? One was almost empty so I dumped those pills into the most recently dated prescription bottle.

"OK," I said aloud, "so this pill gets taken twice a day. Should I put it into the PM side of the containers now, or just sort the morning pills first, then set this bottle across the table with the other PM pills?" What about the daily vitamins and calcium in the huge jars? These were with my supply but I shared them with Mom. Should I take these bottles from my side of the table now, or sort them last?

I knew I couldn't continue, but if I left the table, I would never

Taking the easy way out, I opted to organize my pills first and put Mom's bucket to the side. I decided I would separate out the first Saturday night's pills, to take en-route, and pack only one weekly pill-pack in addition to the next Sunday morning pills, when we would be home. Why was this so complicated?

The large table became cluttered and disorganized. OK. I set my bucket aside to organize Mom's pills instead. How could I be short on her blood pressure medicine? Was that the mail order we'd been waiting for? I wasn't sure what was mailed out, or if we'd received it yet.

remember where I had left off. Still, I just could not handle the chore. This situation put me way past the point of being outside my comfort zone; it put me on the verge of panic.

Something ominous was happening to me. I was frightened. Somewhere in the still-rational part of my brain, I knew that it would take more than a one week vacation to restore my focus and my confidence in my own abilities.

Barbara Strakele is an Eastham resident. For the past two years she has been caring for her mother who has advanced Alzheimer's disease.

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