Written by Dwayne J. Clark
Thursday, 09 August 2012 01:57

We all want, and even need, a chance to get away from it all and recharge our energies. A summer vacation is a rite of modern life, but for the nearly 10 million Americans who are currently caring for both children and an elderly parent-the so-called Sandwich Generation-the idea of going on vacation offers up little more than a stressful dilemma: How can the family possibly take a trip when an aging parent is not up for travelling or for staying home alone? The short answer is that the large majority of these families simply don't leave. Instead, they opt to survive another year of stress and the daily grind without taking a vacation. And they take their chances on burning out and becoming ill-equipped to properly care for their aging parents and even their own children.

Some caregivers might have the luxury of calling on a sibling or another family member to step in and care for their elderly parent. Or the family might split up during the summertime, with one parent (or step parent) taking the kids on a trip while the other stays home with Grandma or Grandpa. Others will look into hiring outside help to provide round-the-clock, in-home care, but this option can be so expensive (and sometimes difficult to find, especially if the senior has dementia or mobility issues) that some families may only have enough funds left over to enable a short, local getaway.

Many, however, will simply stay put, denying themselves a much-needed emotional breather and foregoing the important parent/child bonding opportunities that a lengthy, quality vacation can provide.

Fortunately, there is a solution available for these families: respite care.

A relatively new but increasingly popular program offered by some assisted living communities, respite care allows families to book their loved one for a stay of a few days or even several

weeks at a residential care facility.

Of course, not all respite care programs are created equal. Some are better than others, but in the ideal situation, this is what you can expect.

Respite care acts as the perfect blend of luxury hotel and home-health care, providing just the right mix of amenities and services for the aging, sometimes ailing, senior.

Consider the following benefits that top-notch respite care offers:

1) Guests get personal care. On-staff nurses and/or care personnel at assisted living communities are available 24/7 to monitor the health and well-being of respite care guests, dispense medication on schedule, help with bathing and other hygiene matters, and ensure that they stay on target with all required exercises and therapies. These staff members are fully acquainted with the unique concerns that some seniors contend with, including memory issues and the physical changes that can arise from a stroke or Parkinson's disease, and they are capable of providing the understanding, compassion, and medical know-how that is required for proper care.

2) Luxury. Respite guests stay in elegant, well-appointed apartments with comfortable beds, sitting areas, television, phone, reading materials, and Internet access. Amenities are similar to what's found in nice hotels.
For example, guests may have an on-staff concierge available to answer questions and cater to resident needs, massage therapists to soothe aching muscles, a salon to help the resident feel beautiful, and senior-friendly exercise rooms. Some communities are even pet-friendly, allowing seniors to bring their dogs and take them on walks in sunny courtyards and manicured gardens.

3) Great food. Families don't have to be concerned that their loved one might be eating a TV dinner or hot dogs and beans for the fourth time in two days. Respite guests-like full-time residents-eat fresh-from-the-kitchen, nutritious meals (and snacks) prepared by an on-site chef and served in a well-appointed dining area (or in their room, if preferred).

4) It's engaging. Unlike with a home-health care arrangement, a respite guest can interact with other seniors and make new friends, and he or she can participate in any number of social, cultural and recreational activities that are offered, among them arts and crafts classes; cooking with the chef; gardening; outings to a local museum or park; low-impact exercise classes; on-site, in-theater movies; and live music performances.
Or they can simply enjoy themselves in a sunroom or parlor, playing cards and games with other residents, sitting down to the piano or picking up some other musical instrument they once played or raising their voice in a sing-along.

5) It's affordable. Despite all these amenities, respite care is almost always less expensive than round-the-clock, home-health care, and it's typically priced at an all-inclusive daily rate, with no extras charged for meals, activities and personal care. Think of it as a luxury cruise without having to get aboard a ship.

Keep in mind that setting up a short-term stay for your loved one is not quite as easy as calling up a hotel a week ahead of time and reserving a room. Prior to a stay, a respite guest must provide a physician's report, take a TB test (in some states), and undergo a nurse assessment to ensure that the community fully understands-and is prepared for-the guest's care needs.

The family also needs to prepare themselves and their aging loved one for the short-term stay. The family should take time to do their research on the communities in their area based on such criteria as reputation, number of staff, quality of care and activities, and experience with residents who have similar health concerns, and then take a tour.

No matter how nice the community, though, some seniors will balk at the idea of respite care, a fact that can lead to anxiety for them and guilt for the rest of the family. Administrators at senior living communities suggest the adult caretaker bring their parent in for lunch, a tour and a prearranged chance to get to know some friendly residents with similar backgrounds and interests. That type of preparation can dispel any preconceived notions and apprehension.

For the senior, a short-term stay offers a unique brand of vacation. They, too, take on the stress that comes from being part of a busy household with overworked caregivers, so this break provides them a chance to relax and have time to themselves in new surroundings, enjoy a bit of pampering, make friends, take up a new activity, or explore a hobby that they used to enjoy long ago.

In most cases, family members report back that their elderly parent is much happier and content after a respite stay, and many are pleasantly surprised to find that their loved one actually sees real improvements in their health. One reason for this is that many seniors stay connected with friends made during their stay or continue with activities or hobbies picked up while away from home, activities they couldn't or refused to do before their stay.

Adult caregivers, meanwhile, get to enjoy and reconnect with their spouse and children away from the pressures of the job, bills, and daily living without worry over whether or not their aging parent is being adequately cared for while the family is away. And the children get from their parents high-quality time and attention.

Many adult children entrust their elderly family members to an assisted living community while they go on a second honeymoon or take a couples cruise, treat the kids to a week at Disneyland or a winter ski trip, and attend family reunions and weddings.

In fact, many Sandwich Generation members rely on respite care on a regular basis. They recognize that, as they try to be all things to all family members, a vacation is not an indulgence but a must-a revitalizing break that provides the emotional and physical rest they need to cope long-term with the stress of ongoing caregiving. When they get back to their regular life, they'll be able to go on being effective, patient and loving in their relationships with their aging parents-and their children. And they'll see their aging loved ones thrive because they've had a luxury vacation, too.

Dwayne J. Clark is the founder and CEO of Aegis Living, a community of 28 living facilities in

Washington, California, and Nevada, and the author of My Mother, My Son: A true story of love, determination, and memories...lost (2012, www.mymothermyson.com).