



Avoiding the “What-If” Game

One of the greatest challenges as a caregiver can be staying in the present moment. It is tempting to project into the future and into the land of “what ifs”. This is especially true when there is a crisis or change in the aging person’s situation.

This week I got to experience this personally. When my Father had emergency surgery on Thursday I spent much of the day running “what-if” scenarios. I had a conversation late in the day with a friend of mine who cared for her Mother until her Mother died in August. I began to share all of my “what-if” scenarios and the potential way I’d deal with each of them. My friend stopped me and reminded me that I was thinking about a future that might never happen. She shared with me how many times she had done that when her Mother was ill and how her husband would gently bring her back to today. It reminded me that I had often played the “what-if” game when my Mother was still alive and severely disabled from a stroke. And, like my friend, most of what I worried about and planned for never happened.

What’s the problem with the “what-if” game? The biggest issue with the “what-if” game is that it robs us of today. None of the scenarios I was considering the other day is a reality right now; they are all future possibilities. And I know from experience that almost nothing of what I’m thinking might happen actually will happen. So when we spend time and energy thinking about these scenarios we are losing the time and energy we need to manage the current caregiving situation – or just to enjoy the present moment.

So why do we play the “what-if” game? The fact the future is uncertain can create a lot of anxiety for many of us. This is especially true when we are caregiving for an aging loved one. We may feel as though we just get one crisis under control and another pops up. This can make us anxious about what the next crisis will be and whether we can handle it. So focusing on what might happen and how we will handle it may help us feel that we can cope with the next issue. In small doses this can actually help us feel better and more in control of our lives. The problem comes when we get so focused on what might happen that we aren’t living in today or when we exhaust ourselves worrying and planning for the future.

How can you stop yourself from playing the “what if” game? When you realize that you are continuously running potential future scenarios through your head you can do the following...

- Write them down. Putting these scenarios and possible solutions on paper can help get them out of our head. If you start to think about them again you can remind yourself you have written them down for future reference.



- Call a member of your “support squad”. Tell them that you are stuck in a “what-if loop” in your brain and you need help getting out of it. Often someone else can help us do what we can’t do for ourselves.
- Gently remind yourself of other times you have played the “what-if” game in your life and most – or none – of the things you worried about or planned for came to pass. This can be the nudge you need to come back to the present moment.
- Do something to pull yourself back into the present moment: go for a walk, read a book, meditate, do a crossword puzzle, plan a trip that you have wanted to take, or go to a movie. Any activity that requires you to be fully engaged will help you shift your focus.
- If appropriate for you, engage in spiritual beliefs and practices that help support you during difficult times.
- Give yourself permission to take a mini-vacation – even 30 minutes from worrying. Then do something that helps you “lighten-up”. Laughing and having fun can bring us back to the current moment quicker than almost anything else.

And most of all, remember that today is too precious to lose to a future that may never come!

Dr. Amy