



It is a typical work day and I'm scrambling to wrap up a project. I need to get out on time to beat traffic and pick up the kids from their afterschool program. As I managed to hustle through rush hour traffic and get everyone home in time to throw some grub on the stove, the phone rings. It's my Dad.

"Hey Kris, any chance you can come over?"

"Sure Dad, what's up?" I ask, a bit concerned.

"Well, I'm not feeling good. Can you just get over here now and take me to the doctor?"

"Are you OK? Do we need to call an ambulance?"

"No, No. I'm good. Just come over. Now please."

Now, my dad was never one to complain or even want to go to a doctor so I took the call pretty seriously. But I also knew he was a stubborn son-of-a-gun who wouldn't take my advice over the phone. So the minute my husband rolled in the door from work, I handed off the kids and jetted out to Dad's house. Thankfully, we only lived 10 minutes away. As I drove up, Dad was already waiting on the porch and jumped in my car as soon as I came to a stop. He looked fine though clearly something was on his mind. "Let's get going", he said firmly. I could feel his urgency and found myself driving faster than usual to the hospital where his physician's office is located.

"What's going on? It's not like you to give me a call like this."

"Just keep moving." He took a breath and said timidly "Well, I've got some pain. I think its indigestion."

"My gosh, Dad! Are you having a heart attack? What the heck are you doing? We should have called an ambulance!"

"No, no, it's probably nothing. Just get me to the hospital."

I'm zooming now and just within a few blocks of the emergency entrance, I asked. "How long has this been going on? Why didn't

you call me earlier?"

"Oh, Kris, you're working so hard and have so much on your plate. I figured I'd wait till you got everyone home from school."

My jaw dropped and all I could say was, "Are you crazy!" By now, my adrenaline was sky high. Tears were about to burst, yet I held it together to get Dad to the nurse's station. This is when the fun began.

Immediately I got slammed with a myriad of questions from women in scrubs. "Do you know his medications? Does he have any allergies? Any former hospitalizations? Surgeries? Primary physician? Specialists? Living will? Power of Health?" I didn't have a clue. Feeling completely helpless and terrified, I could only mumble best guesses and "I'm not sure" as they whisked him away to an examine room.

Thankfully, Dad was not having a heart attack. However, he was sick enough to be sent for a quadruple coronary by-pass surgery that evening. The surgery was successful and after a very short hospital stay, Dad was back at home with an array of activities that needed to be orchestrated: visiting nurse, cardiac rehab appointments, follow-up medical visits, prescriptions, rides, groceries, cleaning. The list goes on.

You would think after an experience like this I would have worked with him to get his paperwork in order or at least a list of his medications written down. But as with most people, our lives quickly filled with day-to-day activities that required constant juggling and it slipped through the cracks. In the back of my head I'd say, I should get all of this down on paper so I'm better prepared, but then I'd find myself rushing to a ball game or having to tend to the house or my kids all while dealing with my own work schedule. Before I knew it, another day would pass and I was no further along with getting Dad's important records organized than

I was on that crazy ride to the emergency department.

It's easy to justify and put off this stuff. For some reason, we all think and convince ourselves that we've got time. All is good. Crisis is over. We can take care of it tomorrow. In reality, the longer you wait, the harder it becomes. I've found avoiding the obvious made it more frustrating and difficult to keep my emotions in check and be able to effectively advocate for my dad.

It actually took several additional trips to the emergency department with Dad before I finally took an honest look at the situation. I realized it made no sense to put things off. I really needed to get priorities in check for Dad, for me, and for my family. I made the decision to commit to getting organized and taking time to arm myself with resource knowledge and tools. I took action to create a personal health record for Dad. I even did this for my kids, my husband, and myself. It made a big difference in my ability to handle emergencies and truly be an advocate. A huge weight was lifted from my shoulders as well as Dad's. We sat down and gathered information together which, to my pleasant surprise, resulted in sharing some great family stories I had never heard before.

While I knew I would be the primary person at Dad's side during unexpected events, I placed information in his wallet, his car (even though I was his driver), and his kitchen so he felt that he, too, had some tools that could help him or others speak on his behalf if need be. This all provided a better sense of security to both of us and including him in the process, be it small or large, meant a lot to Dad.

The challenges of me being his family caregiver, from the inconvenience of juggling schedules to effectively communicating with medical personnel, was as troublesome to him as it was to me. The last thing Dad wanted was for me, or anyone else for that matter, to be helping him or to be troubled by any of this. Heck, the guy was about to have a heart attack and he wouldn't call until a time when he thought was more convenient for me to come get him. The sooner I came to grip with the fact that this whole caregiver thing was a learning process that requires genuine intention, as well as patience, to develop knowledge and skill, the easier it became for me to discover ways to help Dad, my family, and myself. While there's no foolproof way to tackling every aspect of caregiving, I found that getting our paperwork in order was a crucial step and helped us face life hurdles with greater focus and peace of mind. We discovered our power to reassure each other and in doing so found a few good laughs along the way.

In her former role as Founding Director of the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago LIFE Center, Kristine Cichowski developed an award-winning education center for families and people faced with physical disabilities and chronic illness. Kristine currently provides education and training to businesses, schools, and community groups on family caregiving, disability inclusion, self-advocacy, and leadership through her company, Power To Be. To learn more, visit www.powertobe.net.



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