

Detour Ahead: Planning for Contingencies on Your Caregiving Journey

ACT 2.

Case Study:

Ricky and Katrina grew up together and married right after high school. Fifteen years later, they have a suburban home and two children under 10. Ricky returned from deployment with serious head and limb injuries. He struggles with depression and often withdraws completely, not wanting to talk or interact with anyone. Katrina initially quit work to provide care for him but, after 18 months, family financial resources are dwindling and she'll need to return to work in the next six to eight months.

ANdy: Morning, Katrina. Tell me how things are going? How's Ricky doing?

ALicia: I think I see improvement. And his doctors agree. But he doesn't see it. And when I try to help encourage him, he rages a bit. I'm not trying to make him mad; I'm trying to provide some positivity – he doesn't see it. And then it seems like he shuts down for a while after. The other day, though, he was online requesting information from the local college...talking about going back to school and finishing his degree. But then I started worrying about money. I was looking at our accounts and I'm going to have to go back to work soon. We can't manage anymore and I'm not sure what I'm going to do. I need to work but we won't be able to afford to hire someone to stay with him.

AN: Where have you been able to get support in the past when you needed help around the house?

AL: We have a great group of friends that I can count on: take the kids for a bit, watch a game with Ricky so I can go to the store, etc. But I don't think I could ask them for long-term help. My mom is great with Ricky – he's like one of her own kids; but she has her own life. And, frankly, I'm not sure I could ask my mom to – or handle my mom – moving in with us.

AN: I get it – I'm not sure I could handle my mom moving in either. Have you talked to her about it? Have you talked to Ricky about it?

AL: I haven't. I'm not quite sure how to bring it up with her and I'm worried about how she'll respond. Since my dad died, she has her own thing going with a group of friends, the other grandkids – she's really found her stride. I just don't know that I could impose on her for my – our – problems. I don't think Ricky will like it at first – his pride gets in the way sometimes. But, if he understands anything, he understands duty. I have to do this. And maybe it will help him focus on his progress in a positive way.

AN: You said she does well with him and he responds well to her. So let's game it out. If you knew your mom would say yes, how would you talk to her about it?

AL: I guess I would have to share with her about our situation. It's hard, though, because I don't want her to think that I can't handle things. I don't want anyone to think that I can't handle things. I also don't want to seem too demanding but I've got to figure something out. And quickly. But it's not fair that she has to give up her life because I can't handle mine.

AN: I hear your concern and you should give yourself credit for all the care you're taking for this decision. If it were easy, you'd have already done it. I think talking to your mom in "I" messages: I need help; we need help.

AL: But what about her having to give up her life?

AN: Share that too: I know this would be a big sacrifice. But, with Ricky getting better day-by-day, it's hopefully temporary. And then set a goal to reevaluate how things are working. For you. For Ricky. And for her.

AL: I think I can do that.

AN: So then let's talk about one or two first steps toward putting this plan into action.

AL: I should probably write out what I want to say to my mom. And also talk it over with Ricky and the kids.

AN: That sounds like a good start. And perhaps even arrange for a trial run – maybe a week – just to see how things go. You can plan some extended time out of the house each day just to see if it's a good fit.