



## **Life for a Parkinson's Caregiver by Dr. Kela Henry**

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When picturing of the face of Parkinson's disease, many Americans think perhaps of one of the greatest boxers of all time, Muhammad Ali. A generation of Americans (the Baby Boomers, to be exact) grew up with him—first as the young Cassius Clay who shocked the boxing world by upsetting then champion Sonny Liston in 1964 to the trash talking, conscientious objecting, often polarizing, but always entertaining Muhammad Ali. He matured into an activist and iconic figure that represented much more than the world of professional boxing. Over the decades we have seen the changes in Mr. Ali: the maturity lines on his face, the thinning around the hair line, the fullness of the body where there was once sculpted muscular definition, stiffness and rigidity in those limbs that could pummel an opponent with rapid flurries of punches, and the inability to engage an audience with his stylistic rhymes, candor and consciousness like he used to. Well, this is what life is like for the caregiver of someone with Parkinson's: watching their loved one go from being vibrant and energetic to living in slow motion.

Parkinson's is a progressive disease of the neurologic system of the body and results in abnormal movement. Some of the hallmark symptoms are the following:

Tremors—shaking of the face, jaw, arms, hands, legs or feet; can affect the lips and tongue also

Bradykinesia—abnormally slow movement

Akinesia—severe stiffness of muscles; when this affects the face, the Parkinson patient's facial expression is like a perpetual blank stare

Depression—levels of the brain chemical dopamine are negatively affected in Parkinson's which can result in the typical sadness and disinterest seen in depression

Unstable Posture—worsening balance and loss of coordination caused by the disease can lead to falls

Unfortunately there is no cure for Parkinson’s at the present time. Although research is being conducted both in the United States and abroad, the mainstay of therapy remains medications that improve dopamine levels in the body and surgery. Because Parkinson’s is a chronic and progressive disorder, caring for someone with this illness is a marathon, not a sprint. The caregiver’s role involves the obvious commitment to the well-being of the Parkinson’s patient. People with Parkinson’s often need help with organizing their medication and supplements, navigating doctor’s visits, preventing falls, and just performing normal everyday activities. As the disease progresses, those with Parkinson’s require even more assistance. You may wonder how a caregiver can possibly manage these competing priorities: care for a loved one with Parkinson’s and care for a family. This is an especially poignant question for those sandwich generation caregivers—people who are caring for an aging parent or in-law while also actively raising children. The short answer is that the caregivers must also commit to keeping themselves as healthy as possible and remember that just as it takes a village to raise a child; it also takes a village to care for elders. Trying to “go it alone” is almost a sure fire path to burnout. Although it sounds cliché, connecting with others who are going through the same experience is important. These connections can help with lifting morale, maintaining a positive outlook, learning coping strategies, and realizing that it’s okay to be less than perfect. With the explosion of mass media and social media it is much easier to find support than it was during the heyday of Muhammad Ali and the Baby Boomer generation. There is an existing village for the spouses, children, extended family, neighbors, and friends of those who are afflicted with Parkinson’s disease. Those caregivers need only reach out with a phone call or a few computer clicks for their help. I recommend the resources listed below.

National Family Caregivers Association [www.caregiveraction.org](http://www.caregiveraction.org) 202-454-3970

National Parkinson Foundation [www.parkinson.org](http://www.parkinson.org) 800-473-4636

Well Spouse Organization [www.wellspouse.org](http://www.wellspouse.org) 800-838-0879

Parkinson’s Disease Foundation [www.pdf.org](http://www.pdf.org) 800-457-6676

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**Dr. Kela Henry, Speaker & Health Advocate**

## About Dr. Kela Henry:

Dr. Kela Henry is dedicated to educating her patients and all those who are in need of fully understanding the benefits and pitfalls of the Affordable Healthcare Act and the business of medicine today. She is also known for her work mentoring young girls and helping them to understand the profound importance of an education and about wise and healthy choices in all areas of their lives. Dr. Henry is a member of the **American Academy of Family Practice** and the **National Medical Association**. She is a primary care physician at Emory Gwinnett Family Physicians. Dr. Henry graduated medical school from the **Medical College of Pennsylvania-Hahnemann School of Medicine** (now Drexel) in 1999 prior to returning to her home state of Georgia and completing her residency program at **Medical College of Georgia** in Augusta. While in medical school she earned two prestigious awards. The first was the **Keystone State Medical Society Award**, a component of the **National Medical Association and Pennsylvania Medical Society** for the state's physicians and physicians in training. The second distinguished award was the **Outstanding Young Women of America Award** which is sponsored by leading women's organizations throughout the country, honoring young women between the ages of 21 and 35 who give their time and efforts to the betterment of community, country, and profession. For more information please visit <http://www.kelahenrymdhealthadvocate.com>.