

Major surgery caregiving: a personal story

by JoAnne Connors

We got the call from the surgeon's office: "Your hip replacement surgery will be in three weeks."

After waiting more than a year, the date felt like a starting line, not just for the surgery, but for my role as a caregiver.

Preparations

Those three weeks before surgery became a time of focused preparation. As a caregiver, I was not only helping get things ready, I was trying to think a few steps ahead. We **set up the house, filled prescriptions** in advance and **gathered the equipment** we'd need. There were a few hiccups along the way, but having things in place gave me a sense of steadiness. It meant that when we came home, I could focus on supporting recovery instead of scrambling to manage logistics.

Preparing mentally was just as important. We attended the hospital's **education class** together, which made a real difference. Hearing the same information, like what movements were safe, what to avoid and what recovery might look like, meant I didn't have to guess or second-guess once we were home. It helped me feel more confident in my role and allowed us to approach recovery as a team.

I also went to the **pre-surgery appointment**, where everything was reinforced. At the time, it felt like a lot to take in, but once we were home, that knowledge became essential. I knew what to watch for, what was normal and when to reach out for help. Supporting the preoperative exercises also became part of my role, encouraging consistency, helping build routine and creating a sense that we were both actively preparing.

Post-surgery care

After surgery, caregiving became immediate and intense. There was no hospital stay, and we went straight home, which meant stepping into the role right away.

The first few days were the hardest. Managing medications, making sure doses and timing were correct and staying alert to changes created a constant undercurrent of responsibility. Even simple tasks, like standing up, getting into bed, washing and using the bathroom, required planning, patience and presence. Nothing could be rushed.

Progress came in small, steady steps, and as a caregiver, I learned to **notice and support those moments**: a short walk down the hall, sitting up a little longer, a bit more confidence each day doing the post-operative exercises. These were physical milestones, signs that things were moving forward.

Sleep was difficult, especially in the beginning. Nights were long, and discomfort affected both of us. I focused on creating as much comfort as possible, from adjusting pillows, keeping to a medication schedule and trying to anticipate needs, but rest took time to come.

That shared fatigue is something caregivers often carry quietly.

Pain management quickly became part of the daily routine. Keeping track of medications, watching the clock and checking in regularly required constant attention. When questions came up, especially about side effects, calling 811 to speak with a nurse was an important support. It reassured me that I didn't have to figure everything out alone.

Looking back

I didn't expect **how much of caregiving would be emotional**. Even over those weeks, there was a constant balancing act between helping and stepping back, supporting and preserving independence. The instinct was to do everything, especially when time felt short. But I had to learn, quickly, that part of good caregiving is **knowing when not to step in**, despite my tendency to take over.

Listening became one of the most important things I could offer. **Not assuming what was needed**, but asking and really listening to the answer. Some days required more hands-on help, others – required space. Because we shared the same information ahead of time, those conversations were easier. We weren't guessing, we were singing from the same songbook.

That's where my perspective shifted. I began to see clearly that **short-term caregiving is still caregiving**. The time frame doesn't make it easier; it just concentrates everything. The responsibility, attention and emotional presence are all necessary, just compressed into a shorter, more intense period.

In the end, those weeks were about more than recovery from surgery. They were about showing up consistently, adapting in real time and learning how much caregiving asks of you, even in the short term. My self-care was very important as well.

Short-term caregiving may feel like a sprint, but it still requires the care, awareness and endurance of a much longer caregiving journey.