

The Daily Union

Saturday, December 15, 2018

Title: Taking Care of Caregivers

The sandwich generation is a term referring to those adults who are sandwiched between aging parents who need care and their own children. As a proud, yet coping, caregiver who fits this definition, I am astutely aware of the challenges this life stage presents.

The Family Caregiver Alliance defines a **caregiver** as an unpaid individual (spouse, partner, family member, friend, or neighbor) involved in assisting others with activities of daily living and/or medical tasks. Different from formal caregivers, who are those paid to provide care in one's home or in a care setting, informal caregiving is voluntary. The responsibility can most certainly be fulfilling, but also requires a lot of patience, energy, time, and often financial resources.

Although people have been caring for others throughout history, the words "caregiver" and "caregiving" are fairly new to most people. Many people see caregiving as the normal expected duties of a husband, a wife, an adult child, a brother or sister or other family member. So while some people may readily identify themselves as family caregivers, others are more reluctant.

Family caregiving often starts with running errands and helping shop or manage legal and financial affairs. It sometimes escalates into more complex or more intimate tasks if the health of the person needing care declines.

Caregiving differs according to need, community resources and caregiver capability. Some people may provide 24-hour care in their home, while others provide guidance and support via long-distance phone calls and correspondence. Some offer care after work or on weekends; others supplement care in a nursing home or have help from a local hospice organization when caring for a family member.

There are a lot of caregivers providing this invaluable service to people they care about:

- Approximately 43.5 million caregivers have provided unpaid care to an adult or child in the last 12 months. [National Alliance for Caregiving and AARP. (2015). Caregiving in the U.S.]
- About 34.2 million Americans have provided unpaid care to an adult age 50 or older in the last 12 months. [National Alliance for Caregiving and AARP. (2015). Caregiving in the U.S.]
- The value of services provided by informal caregivers has steadily increased over the last decade, with an estimated economic value of \$470 billion in 2013, up from \$450 billion in 2009 and \$375 billion in 2007. [AARP Public Policy Institute. (2015). Valuing the Invaluable: 2015 Update.]

It is also important to note that the number of hours dedicated to caregiving increases with the age of the caregiver. The average age of higher-hour caregivers is 51.8 years of age while lower-hour caregiver's average age is 48 years. For example, my mom's needs increase with her age and my age moves forward in tandem.

The holiday season can significantly stretch the resources of informal caregivers as they juggle their own commitments to family and friends with that of the person they are providing care to. A caregiver who once loved to bake and have her house full of family and friends during the holiday may now face a new reality – how to balance that in keeping up with a care schedule for a loved one.

Experienced caregivers offer the following suggestions to help you and your family keep the holiday hassle free:

- Invite guests to the home of the care receiver so that he or she will be comfortable and not have to be taken out.
- Suggest a potluck meal or ask guests to take responsibility for preparing a meal. Make clean-up easy by using festive paper plates and cups.
- Keep the number of guests manageable. Noise and hectic activity can be difficult for a person who is frail or confused.
- Talk to family and friends before they arrive. If the care receiver is confused, has trouble eating or has any behaviors that guests might not understand, explain the circumstances to them and tell them how to approach the situation.
- Take the hassle out of gift giving. Consider giving a gift of love such as an offer to reserve conversation time with a friend or a promise to attend a grandchild's school play. Caregivers who wish to purchase gifts should consider giving one gift per family, mail-ordering purchases or asking a neighbor or friend to help with shopping.
- If guests ask what they can bring, suggest gifts that really will help -- frozen prepared foods, an IOU for caregiving that offers you respite time, a trip to the beauty or barber shop for your care receiver, or an offer to run specific errands.

Source: Iowa State University Extension

Caregivers don't need to tackle the holiday season alone. They should seek out others in their family or circle of support to help with the many responsibilities of caregiving. Asking a neighbor to make a visit so that the caregiver can make an extra trip to the grocery store or put up holiday decorations without the stress of also keeping an eye on their loved one.

Take a close look at your own family and friend dynamics. Do you have a sibling who is the primary caregiver for your aging parent? Do you have a neighbor that takes care their aging and/or disabled loved one? Consider making a phone call to the caregiver you know and offer to help with a meal, make a visit to give the caregiver a break, or run errands to help with the many tasks associated with the holiday season. Together we all can work to ensure that everyone has a happy holiday and do our part to take care of caregivers! Until next time, keep living resourcefully!