

Partners in Care

By Lisa M. Petsche

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Let a Caregiver Know You Care

Informal caregivers provide practical and emotional support to older adults with health challenges who might otherwise require placement in a long term care facility. Typically they are spouses or adult children of the care receiver, many seniors themselves.

Their role involves physical, psychological, emotional and financial demands. Caregiving can be a heavy load, made even more difficult by the limited availability of community support services and, in some cases, little or no family support. Burnout is common, due to the physical toll and emotional strain of caring for someone with chronic health problems that impact their functioning and quality of life.

If you know a caregiver, consider these strategies for helping them not only survive but also thrive.

- **Keep in touch.** Assume responsibility for maintaining the relationship, given the constraints on your friend's time and energy. Regularly call to see how they are doing. Visit with refreshments – takeout coffee or tea (or bring an insulated carafe from home) and treats, for example. Send a card or note to brighten their day; it's sure to be a welcome surprise amidst the usual postal bills and junk mail.
- **Listen non-judgmentally,** demonstrate compassion and don't give unsolicited advice. Provide support and encouragement.
- **Educate yourself** about the care receiver's disease, to help you understand the kinds of challenges the caregiver might be facing now or in the future.
- **Volunteer to be the point person** who keeps others in your social network up-to-date on how the care receiver and caregiver are doing and advises how loved ones can help. Coordinate get-togethers that don't involve any work on the caregiver's part.
- **Offer to accompany your friend** to a caregiver support group meeting if they can make respite arrangements; otherwise, offer to be the respite provider so they can attend a group.
- **Encourage the caregiver to practice self-care** by eating nutritiously, exercising and getting sufficient rest in order to maintain good health. Do whatever you can to help make it possible. For example, bring over a meal or offer to sit with the care receiver while the caregiver exercises or takes a nap to catch up on lost sleep.
- **Ask, rather than guess,** what kind of practical help you can provide. Perhaps it's walking the dog, running errands, performing household chores or providing transportation to appointments. If your assistance is declined, continue to express your desire to help. Meanwhile, take it upon yourself to deliver a casserole or muffins or, if you're a neighbor, sweep both walks or bring in both sets of garbage cans.
- **Surprise the caregiver** with a periodic treat, such as a magazine, a music CD or movie, fresh flowers or a plant, gourmet coffee or tea, or a gift certificate to a restaurant that has takeout and delivery service.



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Let a Caregiver Know You Care (cont.)

- Volunteer your time. Offer to sit with the care receiver for an hour while the caregiver goes to a hair appointment or a religious service, for example, or for a longer stretch so they can attend a social event.
- Offer to get information about community support services that may be of help, and encourage their use as appropriate.
- Encourage your friend to take one day at a time and to trust that they will be able to cope with whatever lies ahead. Help them to stay positive and reassure them that they are not alone.