

Partners in Care

By Lisa M. Petsche

Lisa M. Petsche is a social worker and a freelance writer specializing in boomer and senior health matters. She has personal and professional experience with elder care.

Thoughtful Gifts for Caregivers

The contribution of informal caregivers of seniors often goes unrecognized in our society. These unpaid helpers provide practical assistance and enhance quality of life for ill or frail older adults who might otherwise require placement in a long-term care residence.

Typically, caregivers are spouses or children; many are seniors themselves. The majority are women.

The loved ones they care for have physical or mental impairment (perhaps both) caused by one or more chronic health conditions, stroke and dementia being most common.

The caregiving role involves physical, psychological, emotional and financial demands. It is a heavy load, exacerbated by the limited availability of community support services.

But there are rewards for caregivers, too. These may include a closer relationship with the care recipient; increased creativity and assertiveness; increased insight into their own strengths and limitations; a general increase in compassion for others; re-thinking of values and priorities; learning to live in the present and appreciate the simpler things in life that make it enjoyable. Then, too, there is the satisfaction of knowing they are doing something meaningful.

The caregiving journey can be long, though, and particularly challenging when the elder has heavy hands-on needs, a demanding personality, or cognitive impairment. A variety of emotions may be experienced along the way, including sadness, grief, frustration, anger, resentment, guilt, anxiety and loneliness. Burnout is common, due to the physical toll of caring for someone who is ill and the emotional strain of dealing with the suffering and decline of a loved one.

Thoughtful Gifts

To show you care, the following are a variety of gift ideas for the caregiver in your life--for special occasions and for no particular occasion (that is, as a nice surprise).

- Booklet of IOUs for one or more of the following: home-cooked meals, baked goods, respite care, household chores or repairs, yard work, chauffeuring, running errands.
- Answering machine, cordless phone or cell phone.
- Wall calendar with plenty of space for noting appointments.
- Caregiving binder for keeping records and organizing paperwork.
- Membership in a caregivers' organization or the non-profit organization associated with their relative's disease (for example, the Alzheimer's Association or Parkinson Foundation).
- Gift certificate for a home healthcare agency, medical supply store or housecleaning service.
- Book of tickets or gift voucher for accessible transportation, if the care receiver is not able to ride in a car, so they can go out together.
- Inspirational book (choose a collection of verses or short stories if the caregiver does not have much time for reading).



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Thoughtful Gifts (cont.)

- Subscription to a caregiving periodical, or a magazine that reflects an interest (such as nature) or favorite pastime (gardening, for example).
- Decorative journal for recording their experiences, thoughts and feelings, and a high quality pen that glides smoothly.
- Relaxation tapes or miniature water fountain.
- Bird feeder and seed, or binoculars for bird watching.
- Hobby or craft supplies.
- Writing paper and envelopes, or a set of all-occasion note cards, along with postage stamps.
- Scented items: hand and body lotion, cologne, bar soap, bath salts or shower gel, drawer sachets, potpourri or votive candles.
- Basket of sweets, gourmet coffees and teas, jams and jellies or dried fruit and nuts.
- Gift certificate to a restaurant with takeout and delivery service, a dry cleaner with pickup service or a pharmacy or grocery store that delivers.
- Gift certificate for a massage to help them relax and rejuvenate.
- Two tickets to a cultural event – so a friend can accompany them – and an IOU for respite care.

For higher-cost items, pool resources with family members or friends.

Keep in mind that emotional support and your time are the two most valuable gifts you can give a caregiver.