

# Partners in Care

By Lisa M. Petsche

*Ideas for pitching in to help an aging relative By Lisa M. Petsche*

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## Sharing the care is only fair

Caring for an aging relative typically involves physical, psychological, emotional and financial demands. There aren't enough hours in the day for caregivers to get everything done, let alone spend time with other important people in their life and tend to their own needs.

If you have a parent or other close family member who is caring for an aging relative, it's important to reach out and support them. This can be done even if you don't live close enough to provide direct help or your personal circumstances don't allow it. Sharing the care is only fair, and by lightening the caregiver's load you can help prevent them from wearing down, so they can take optimal care of your relative.

Read on for a variety of ideas for supporting the primary caregiver in your family.

### *If You Live Nearby*

- Offer to sit with the care receiver for an hour while the caregiver runs errands or gets their hair done, for example, or for a longer stretch so they can attend a social event. Set up a regular time for providing such respite.
- Offer to accompany the caregiver and care receiver to a community event, so the caregiver has an extra pair of hands and eyes.
- Coordinate get-togethers that don't involve any work on the caregiver's part. For example, invite the caregiver and care receiver to dinner. Or visit with refreshments or a takeout meal.
- Offer to accompany the caregiver to a support group meeting if they can make respite arrangements; otherwise, offer to be the respite provider so they can attend a caregivers' group.
- Help make it possible for the caregiver to practice self-care. For example, bring over a meal or offer to stay with the care receiver while they attend an exercise class.
- Ask, rather than guess, what kind of practical help would work best.

Perhaps it's walking the dog, running errands 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 freshly baked goods or perform outdoor tasks such as yard work and snow clearing.



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# Sharing the care is only fair (cont.)

## *Helping From A Distance*

Even if you're not available for hands-on assistance, you can still help the primary caregiver with meeting your relative's needs. Some ideas for how to do this are included below. These suggestions can also apply if you'd like to help but have your own health challenges or competing responsibilities; or perhaps you have a conflicted relationship with the caregiver or care receiver and need to maintain some distance.

- If your relative has a chronic illness, gather and share information to help family members understand the disease and get an idea of what to expect for the future.
- Offer to research support services in your relative's community that may be of help, and encourage their use as appropriate. Information can be obtained from the local Area Agency on Aging. To find the appropriate office, call the Administration on Aging's toll-free Eldercare Locator Service at 1-800-677-1116 or search online at [www.eldercare.gov](http://www.eldercare.gov).
- Clip and send articles about caregiving that contain practical information — behavior management or self-care strategies, for example.
- Give the caregiver a gift membership in a caregivers' organization or the non-profit organization associated with your relative's health condition (for example, the Alzheimer's Association). Membership benefits usually include a newsletter and access to other valuable resources.
- Volunteer to be the point person who keeps family and friends up-to-date on how the care receiver and caregiver are doing and needs that arise. Organize a telephone call-out chain so important information can be shared in a timely fashion.
- Ask what kind of help the caregiver could use most. Perhaps you can cover, or at least contribute towards, the cost of medical equipment, home adaptations, a house cleaning or yard maintenance service, specialized transportation, respite care or a vacation for the caregiver. Coordinate pooling of funds with other family members as needed.
- Offer to come and stay with your relative so the caregiver can take a vacation.

## *Emotional Support*

- Assume responsibility for communication. Arrange a regular time to call or Skype. With each contact, ask not only how the care receiver is doing, but also how the caregiver is coping. Encourage the caregiver to call you (collect if necessary) with any concerns. Don't forget to express appreciation for all that they do for your relative.
- Listen to the caregiver without judgment and don't give unsolicited advice. Offer empathy and words of support. Encourage them to take one day at a time so they don't get overwhelmed.
- Send a card or note to brighten the caregiver's day. Include a humorous anecdote or cartoon clipping.
- Surprise the caregiver with a treat, such as a music CD, fresh flowers or a plant, gourmet coffee or tea, or a gift certificate to a restaurant that has takeout and delivery service.
- Encourage the caregiver to accept offers of help and to ask for assistance. Offer to facilitate a conversation among family members if the caregiver is hesitant to make requests for fear of "burdening" loved ones.

## *Final Thoughts*

If you haven't been a family caregiver, it can be hard to fully understand or appreciate what's involved. Even if you have experience with the role, no two caregiving situations are identical.

Caregivers tend to be reluctant to request help, so don't assume that if they have not asked it means they are managing well. There's a good chance they're trying to shield family members from heartache or added responsibilities in their already busy lives.

They may need reminding that caregiving is a family affair, and easier to bear when the load is shared.



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