

Caring for the Caregiver in a Season of Cheer: Five Suggestions to Help Those Who Are Caring for a Loved One

The holidays can be an especially trying time—both physically and emotionally—for individuals and families who are caring for a loved one coping with a life-threatening illness. The following suggestions explain how you can help shoulder their burden this time of year.

Every year, most of us look forward to the holiday season for a myriad of reasons: beloved family traditions, memorable meals, gift exchanges, special services in our houses of worship, and more. But what if, for the first time, someone dear to you is ill? What if a close friend or relative finds him or herself in a long-term caregiving role? Suddenly, all might not feel as merry and bright as it once did, and the world might not be filled with quite as much joy.

Yes, the holidays are a time for celebrating, but for those who are caring for a loved one who is sick, sadness and increased responsibility might make it difficult to want to celebrate anything. The upcoming weeks are a wonderful opportunity to bring good cheer (as well as a pair of helping hands!) to a caregiver this season.

Caregivers are the unsung heroes who perform a sacred duty day in and day out, but consider this: while simultaneously trying to ensure the comfort and health of a loved one, most family caregivers – like us – are thinking about the special meals to be cooked, shopping to be done, and special celebrations and services to attend—all on top of their normal (hectic) everyday routine. While the focus is understandably on the patient, here are a few suggestions to recognize and help the caregivers in your world.

Give a caregiver a break. Caregivers really need to take care of themselves. What better time is there to carve a few hours out of your schedule so that a caregiver can experience some much-needed free time? Whether she goes to a Christmas party, shops for gifts, visits friends, or just *relaxes*, she will be able to recharge her batteries and recapture a feeling of normalcy before returning to her caregiving duties with a refreshed spirit. Consider trimming the caregiver's tree while she tends to the needs of her loved one, or help bake Christmas cookies, run errands, or perform other household chores.

Offer good holiday cheer. If you've ever lost a loved one, you know that others' good cheer can make you feel even worse by comparison. This holiday season, it's likely that many caregivers may be uninterested in or even saddened by trees, tinsel, and carols. They might not have time to indulge in holiday trappings or traditions, or they might be reminded of happier times that are no more. Be sensitive to caregiver's moods and wishes. Will focusing on the more lighthearted aspects of Christmas be a source of comfort or distress? Remember that if a caregiver would rather do without social chit-chat, holiday movies, or lights in the windows this year, that's ok. Do what you can to help her enjoy a quiet holiday and encourage her to seek some joy by focusing on the reason for the season.

Be a good listening friend. Most people tend to offer practical support, but sometimes caregivers are reluctant to relinquish even the smallest of their duties because they're convinced that the patient's wellbeing depends entirely upon them. Caregivers place great value on having a compassionate, nonjudgmental friend – one who is a good listener and can help them process their feelings. On a regular basis, focus your attention solely on the caregiver and not the patient. Ask how *he* is doing. Tell him you're praying for him. Bring the caregiver a card or a gift. Make the holidays special for him, and acknowledge the love and loyalty he is showing his loved one.

Provide a spiritual top-up. From time to time, we all wonder why “bad things happen to good people,” and doubts of this sort can heavily impact a caregiver's morale and spiritual health, especially during the holidays – a stressful time under the best of circumstances. Encourage the caregivers in your life to dispel their weariness by attending a special service offered by many houses of worship. Since music and the arts lift the spirit, invite them to a concert or take over their caregiving duties for an evening so they can go with another friend or family member. Other family caregivers feeling worn down and weary may find special comfort in the familiar scriptures and stories you can share with them at this time of year.

If necessary, help to adapt traditions. Temper holiday celebrations by keeping in mind their effect on caregivers and their loved one who is sick. They might be opposed to long-established family rituals if circumstances have changed. Seasonal merriment imposed on a household burdened with sickness and sadness can make a bad situation worse. However, there is no need to “cancel” Christmas or Chanukah altogether. Put some thought into what might be most appropriate. For example, instead of inviting many neighbors and friends to a traditional cocktail party, it might be more helpful and appropriate to help caregivers organize and prepare for a small gathering of family and close friends over a holiday meal or coffee and cookies.

While the “season to be jolly” will offer extra challenges to caregivers, you will have the satisfaction of knowing your show of love and support is one of the greatest gifts you can give this year. And isn't it *love* that we are celebrating, after all?

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Since publishing the critically acclaimed book, *A Sacred Walk: Dispelling the Fear of Death and Caring for the Dying*, Donna is often called upon to speak on many of the multifaceted topics covered in her book. Visit the “Appearances” page of www.asacredwalk.com to learn more, or “Contact Donna” for information on her availability to speak to your group.

About the Book: *A Sacred Walk: Dispelling the Fear of Death and Caring for the Dying* (A&A Publishing, 2008, ISBN: 978-0-615-24585-0, \$15.95) is available at bookstores nationwide and from major online booksellers. Wholesale pricing for distributors is available direct from the publisher.