Mindfulness for Caregivers

“Yesterday is history, tomorrow is a mystery, today is a gift of God, which is why we call it the present.” — Bil Keane

Every age has its buzz words or fads. In the 50s, the hula-hoop was all the rage and anyone from toddlers to grandparents had a ring of plastic circling their hips. The Viet Nam war years gave birth to flower power and the Age of Aquarius. “Political correctness” then took the country by storm, encouraging folks to refer to those different from themselves with respect. We now seem to be in the Age of Health ~ mental, physical and emotional ~ in which we drink green stuff for nutrients and strike yoga poses for inner peace.

Mindfulness is one of the health related practices we hear so much about now. According to Psychology Today, “mindfulness is a state of active, open attention to the present.” HealthGuide.Org takes this definition an important step further saying, “Mindfulness is the practice of purposely focusing your attention on the present moment – and accepting it without judgment.” Some researchers even classify mindfulness as a “key element” in achieving happiness in life.

There is some basis for the claims. It stands to reason that focusing on the past is a problem for many. “If I’d only married someone else,” one person may think – over and over and over. Or, “If I’d only gone into a career, my siblings would not have expected me to take care of Dad.” Thinking about past decisions, hurts and resentments does not change the condition of our lives. What it does do is foster depression and the more we mentally rummage around in the past, the more depressed we are likely to become.

By the same token, ruminating on the future creates anxiety. As the great American author Mark Twain once said, “I have known a great many troubles, but most of them never happened.” This is particularly true for caregivers. If the patient has a heart condition, the caregiver may worry he will have a heart attack in the night and she will not hear him. This robs her of her sleep but doesn’t do a lick to make her loved one healthier. Worry about the future lays a clear path to increased anxiety, perhaps even panic attacks, and decreased health.

Scientists have found that mindfulness gives us physical and mental health benefits. Although all the research is not rock solid, it strongly appears mindfulness helps lower your blood pressure, improves gastrointestinal symptoms and boosts immune functioning. Guided imagery, a mindfulness technique, can help your patient to sleep as well as to reduce chronic pain. Mental health professionals teach mindfulness to treat depression, anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder, aggressiveness, eating disorders and substance abuse.

“You’re telling me to live in the present?” you may ask. “I’m always in the present; changing linens, fixing special meals, dealing with the insurance. I would love to escape from the present for just awhile.”

Caregiving can give us a myopic view of the present since we are often overwhelmed with just the negative aspects of life that generate stress, anxiety and depression. It can feel like a cage with no key since when we are home, we wish to get away and when we are away, we worry...
Ask the Caregiver

Q. My elderly uncle is bedridden. As his caregiver, it is important to me that he look presentable and well-cared for when family and friends come to visit. Unfortunately, he doesn't share my opinion. He is happy to wear the same pajamas and robe day after day. I don't think this pattern is healthy. He has physical issues, but his mind is extremely sharp. I am at wits end and finding I am not able to communicate with my uncle anymore because he is being so stubborn. Do you have ideas for me?

A: If you know for sure your uncle’s behavior isn't due to depression, and his poor self-care habits aren’t bringing in rats or other small rodents, there probably isn't much you can do to spiff him up. Is there a chance his stubbornness is more about control and he is trying desperately to exert his independence? Is there a chance he doesn’t care to be around those who come to visit? Caregivers often labor under the misconception that they can regulate the behaviors of those in their care. Healthy caregiving is more about service than about supervising; more about listening than talking.

Before your communication with your uncle breaks down completely, allow him to voice his concerns in a safe environment with no arguments or suggestions overriding his opinions. If he needs you to launder his bedclothes and sheets on his schedule, allow him that kindness. Experts tell us we can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar. So try showering your uncle with catalogs full of handsome pajamas and robes. Fill his room with lovely fresh flowers and plants. Prepare hot tea and tasty goodies served on a lovely tray. Maybe in time your uncle will embrace your more gracious way of life and you won't have to worry that the bedbugs might bite.

Caregiving at a Cookout:
14 Tips to Ensure a Good Time

Almost everyone looks forward to gathering with family and friends for a backyard barbecue. But if you've been dreading going to one because of your responsibilities as a caregiver, never fear: Both you and your elderly loved one can have a fine time, if you plan ahead.

But first, make sure that your relative is in good enough health to attend a party where there will be heat, bugs, noise, smoke from the grill and possibly rambunctious children. Also, check with your hosts to ensure that they understand and can accommodate your loved one's limitations. If not, find another caregiver to look after your relative while you attend alone; it's important for you to socialize and recharge.

However, if your hosts are amenable and your loved one is up to it, don't leave him or her behind. Joan Wright, a certified geriatric manager at NVNA and Hospice in Norwell, Mass., told AgingCare that you should remember that every elderly person was once young, mobile and eager to socialize. "Those desires are still there even if their physical capacity to fulfill them is not."

Here are some tips from Ms. Wright and others to ensure that everyone has a good time:

Before the barbecue
--Talk to the host or hostess about dietary limitations your elderly relative may have. If the menu is too spicy, fatty or hard to chew, plan to bring some food that the senior can eat, and request that the meal be served at the same time as everyone else's.
--Find out what sort of seating the hosts will have for guests. If they just have backless picnic benches, which can be difficult for an elderly person to sit on and provide no back support, ask if you can bring a folding chair or stackable plastic chair.
--If your relative is in a wheelchair, find out in advance if your hosts' gates are wide enough and slopes gentle enough to maneuver it into the back yard.
--Ask if there's any shade in the backyard; if not, ask if you can also bring a portable beach umbrella.
--Lay out comfortable clothes that include layers, since some seniors feel cold even when it's warm out. Include sturdy shoes to prevent trips and falls.
--Before you go, make sure that the senior has put on some sunscreen.

At the barbecue
--Set up a spot for your relative away from the hot grill and any areas where children are likely to be throwing balls or rough-housing.
--Find out the location of the closest bathroom, and if accidents could be a problem, seat the senior near it. If your relative needs assistance using the restroom,
about what’s going on at home. We feel we can’t win.

Caregivers may also shy away from mindfulness because the serious practice of it can be time-consuming with its emphasis on yoga and meditation. But we are advocating for what we would call “Everyday Mindfulness” – using all of our senses to live each moment of our lives to the fullest. An example of this may help.

Jean often resented her husband’s insistence that she rub cream into his arthritic hands. "He’s not helpless," she thought. "This is certainly something he can do for himself." One day, Jean noticed she could feel the knots the arthritis put on his fingers. She could smell the faint flowery scent of the cream he favored. She could hear how his breathing deepened and see his soft smile as he relaxed. And Jean began to also enjoy this time of caregiving intimacy. Oh, sometimes the old resentful thoughts would pass through her mind. But she simply watched them come and go without judging herself or her husband.

As you can see, daily activities of a caregiver, indeed of anyone, can lend themselves to mindfulness. It is simply savoring the moment, no matter how simple. It is just important to remember to use all your senses and experience those moments ~ even negative ones ~ without judgment. But, since we are not accustomed to thinking this way, here are a variety of suggestions to get you started. Understandably, there are as many examples as there are moments in our lives.

- **Breathe.** Take in a full, deep breath, allowing your stomach to rise and then fall when you slowly expel it completely. Notice how your mind quiets and your muscles relax as you repeat this four or five times.

- **Smile.** Close your eyes as you do. Feel how the muscles it takes to smile start relaxing in your face. Take the opportunity to listen to the sounds around you. Perhaps your neighbor is running the lawn mower and you can smell the cut grass. The birds may be calling to one another and you can feel the stirring of a summer breeze on your face. Breathe slowly and deeply as you take your two minute break.

- **Enjoy your meals.** Notice the texture as well as the taste of watermelon as opposed to cantaloupe. Could you tell the difference blindfolded? What is it about ice cream that you like so much? Savor how the tang of tart cherries offsets the smooth taste of the vanilla cheese cake. Smell the rich scent of tomato as you put another bite of your salad into your mouth.

- **Go to bed.** Scrunch up the pillow so it cradles your head like a lover’s embrace. Sniff the clean scent of fabric softener. Feel each muscle relax as you feel yourself sinking into the mattress. Picture your mind as a school chalkboard. As each concern of the day appears on its surface, see yourself wiping it away with a flourish.

- **Check out the changes in nature.** The trees and bushes sport every shade of green known to man. Feel the texture of a new leaf and how it changes as the season progresses. Sassafras leaves smell vastly different than maple or pine. Unpleasant smells, such as that angry skunk, can sharpen our attention as well. As human beings, we have the tendency to focus on the big stuff (I wish I could take a trip to Hawaii) and totally miss the joys of a simple walk around the block.

- **Keep a bird feeder.** Blue jays and chickadees are natural born entertainers for both yourself and your loved one. You can keep track of which birds like what food, who gets along with whom and how the population changes with the seasons. Can you recognize birds by their song? This may not be strictly a mindfulness activity but it can certainly keep you in the present.

- **Focus on thankfulness.** Each morning think of something you are thankful for and resolve to notice instances of it throughout the day. Many, many studies have validated the powerful relationship of thankfulness to happiness. Even in difficult circumstances, there is always something for which to be thankful. I can breathe. I can walk without pain. I have terrific grandchildren. Those beautiful orioles are back this year. The list can go on and on.

Of course, like anything, mindfulness is not for everyone. Florian Ruths, a British researcher of mindfulness based therapy, cautions that some sufferers with PTSD may experience flashbacks while using more advanced mindfulness techniques such as meditation. Some people who have panic attacks have difficulty when focusing on their internal symptoms such as heartbeat or breathing. These folks would be fine with most of the suggestions above that emphasize external items.

While the mindfulness recommended here is not for the purist who believes you can only practice it with yoga and meditation, it is enough to help you “rest in stillness – to stop doing and focus on just being” (Jon Kabat-Zinn, a biomedical scientist). Anything that contributes to the happiness of caregivers is a huge plus!

By Andrea Heeres
The Mission Of Senior Resources
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Readers Corner:
“Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?”
by Roz Chast

Laughter is a major stress reliever, and in her book, a memoir in cartoons, Chast uses humor and honesty to tackle the day-to-day issues experienced by a caregiver of aging parents. Adult children of senior parents will laugh with recognition as Chast recounts the tribulations of dealing with assisted living, dementia symptoms and other caregiver challenges.

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