

Guilt-free Caregiving

All caregivers are struggling or will struggle with feelings of guilt, no matter how hard we're trying to be the best caregiver possible.

Why do we experience guilt? There are 5 reasons that come to mind.

1. **Promises** made in the past come back to haunt us. That promise we made to Dad on his death bed that we'd never put Mom in a home; promises we made to parents that we'd always keep our brother with a disability in our home; promises that we'd never bring a stranger into the house as a caregiver.

2. We are doomed by the thought of "**coulda**," "**woulda**," "**shoulda**." I coulda done more; I shoulda done more; if only I knew, I woulda done more.

3. We are all **poor communicators**. We try to read the mind of the person for whom we care. We expect them to know what we're thinking. We make assumptions about meanings. We don't seek clarification and then, we wonder why the things we do aren't meeting the needs of the person for whom we care, and why the things they say and do often displease us.

4. Then, we feel guilty for being **angry** with them. Anger is the primary source of our guilt. Expressing anger toward the care recipient always creates guilt, but the unexpressed anger that we swallow causes even more guilt.

5. Lastly, some of us were raised in a **culture** where guilt is ingrained. Nothing we do is ever quite good enough. We are never able to rest on our laurels. We know it could have been done better. So, we feel guilty.

There are 24 hours in a day and, in an ideal world, we could spend all 24 caring for the person we love. We'd create a warm, loving, supportive, nurturing relationship where we would never feel guilty because everything we do is done perfectly. But in fact, we live in a less than ideal world. In addition to being a caregiver, most of us are also involved with spouses, parents, children, grandchildren, siblings, and in-laws. Most caregivers are also employed with jobs that keep us away from the home for 9 hours a day. Most



of us have a home that requires daily attention. Someone must do the laundry, shop, prepare the meals, clean the bathroom, feed the dog and all the other tasks that are necessary to keep a home functioning. If you do all these things, daily, you've probably spent 14 hours of the 24 available to each of us. What's left for caregiving? Ten hours, if you give up sleeping. If you also have your own medical appointments, responsibilities outside the home and job, such as church, PTA, politics, family gatherings, you have even less time to be a caregiver. How can you possibly do your best as a caregiver with all these constraints? It's no surprise that you don't feel that you've done enough, or that what you've done isn't good enough. Hence the guilt.

What can you do to eliminate things from the list of "must dos"? **NOTHING!**

It's important for caregivers to recognize the signs when caregiving is too much and act. Unresolved guilt can lead to depression. Know the signs of depression. Watch for headaches, disturbed sleep. Can't fall asleep, perhaps can't sleep through the night, maybe just wanting to sleep all day. Notice if you're easily upset. Either crying with little cause or angry a lot of the time. Are you having difficulty concentrating on things, remembering things, making decisions? Do you feel overwhelmed. Do you feel hopeless. These are all signs that the guilt is more



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Mission

To provide a comprehensive and coordinated system of services designed to promote the independence and dignity of older persons and their families in Muskegon, Oceana, and Ottawa—a mission compelling us to target older persons in greatest need but to advocate for all.



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Guilt-free Caregiving, Continued from

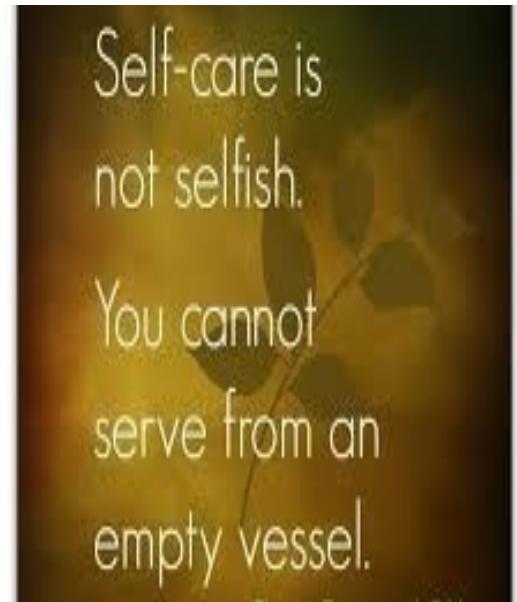
than you can manage, and you're depressed. What do you do?

Recognize the signs in yourself. Monitor your feelings regularly and act when you see the signs. It's essential for your physical and mental health and for the future care of your loved one.

What actions can you take? First, let go. **Simplify your lifestyle.** Let go of the notion that meals are cooked perfectly, balanced perfectly with a loving family gathered around a perfectly set dining room table. Sometimes, pizza delivery in a cardboard box gets the job done and saves you hours of time. Learn to lower your standards. You're not perfect and will never be. You can learn to live with "good enough." You'll have more time for caregiving that is loving and nurturing if it doesn't also have to be perfect. If your mother's hair isn't washed every week without fail, and instead you spend that time looking at a family photo album with her, she'll feel happy, and you might also get the benefit of sharing a happy moment instead of a chore-filled moment. You are still making memories; try to make some that are happy and not just duty filled.

Ask for help. Caregivers always say there's no one who can help me: everyone is busy, has a job, has family responsibilities. We make excuses for other people without giving them the benefit of making their own choices. Remember, we are poor communicators. We don't actually ask many people for help we just assume that they can't/won't help, and we feel angry that we have no help. Instead, sit down and draw up a list of everyone you can think of who you ever helped. Then create another list of everyone your care recipient ever helped. I guarantee you it's a long list. People who are selected to be caregivers are chosen because they have a history of helping others. People know they can be relied upon. The lists you created are your potential pool of helpers. Next begin to think about all the things you do in each day or week. Itemize them, with specifics. Caregivers tend to speak in global terms. "I'm just so busy, there isn't time for anything," but there are no specifics, so no one knows how to help you. Make a detailed list about each and every thing and how often it has to be done and how long it takes to accomplish. Now you can begin to ask for help.

No one wants to sign up to take over your role as a caregiver, but almost everyone on the list would be willing, if asked, to pick up your mother's medications once a month at the pharmacy. That's one less task for you to do. Almost everyone you, or she, ever helped would be willing to stop over once a month for an hour and visit with your mom so you can have an hour of alone time. What you'll find, if you do it, is that the person you ask will thank you for the opportunity to help. People want to help. They want to feel valued. No one wants to take it all



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on but a little help here and there, when accumulated can give a caregiver a respite break. I remember when my husband was confined to the house and shouldn't be left alone the entire day, but I had to work to pay the bills, women from my church would stop by and read the daily Bible readings with him. Each one took a turn. He looked forward to it so much and I had the peace of mind that someone was stopping in to see him. People can't help you if you don't ask.

Avoid negativity. Negativity is contagious and caregivers are vulnerable to negative thoughts and feelings because they tend to be a bit overwhelmed by their responsibilities and a bit angry about the turn their lives have taken. Negative people drag you down. Stay away from nasty people, sarcastic people. Try to surround yourself with people who are optimistic, compassionate, and funny. Nothing relieves stress like a good belly laugh. Make it your business to find something to laugh about each day. I have a friend who trolls social media sites looking for humor and she sends me a daily laugh. Sometimes they make me laugh out loud. It helps me maintain perspective about the things in life that are truly important and helps me to give up worrying about the small stuff.

At the end of each day ask yourself, "Have I done all I could today, given the time, talent and resources I have?" If you can answer yes, you've done enough. The question isn't "Did I do a perfect job?" or "Was I the best at what I did?". Just did I do the best I could in the reality of the world in which I live.

Written by Dr. Beverly Kidder.

Ten Ways to Maintain a Positive Attitude

by Helen Hunter, ACSW, LSW

1. Learn healthy ways to manage your stress
2. Think of challenges as opportunities to shine
3. Look for the best in others and yourself
4. Eat right and get plenty of rest
5. Exercise for 30 minutes or more on most days of the week
6. Focus on the joys in life and remember to laugh
7. Do something nice for someone
8. Make time each day to relax
9. Surround yourself with upbeat people
10. Take pride in your work and your achievements



Quotes

January–February website

www.agingcare.com

This Month's Book

Caroline H. Sheppard shares her story with lessons learned and how she was called to oversee the care of five different family members over a fifteen-year period from afar.



Finding HOPE in the CHAOS of Long-Distance Caregiving

Caroline H. Sheppard, MSW

Avoiding the Hazards of Winter for Older Adults

Winter is a special time for celebration. It should also be a time for added caution if you or someone in your family is an older adult. It is the season for falls, slips on icy streets and other dangers that can be especially harmful for older adults.

"Something as simple as a fall can be devastating for older men and women," says Dr. Evelyn Granieri, Chief of Geriatric Medicine and Aging at NewYork-Presbyterian/The Allen Hospital and Assistant Professor of Medicine at Columbia University Medical Center. "Before the cold weather arrives, it is important to prepare."



Dr. Granieri addresses some of the most pressing concerns mature adults have about their health and safety during the winter:

- **The flu.** Influenza is a serious illness that can be fatal in older adults, who often have chronic medical conditions. The vaccine offers some, if not complete, protection against the flu and its consequences and can be administered as early as September. The flu season begins in mid-October and runs through March.
- **Hypothermia.** Keep your thermostat set to at least 65 degrees to prevent hypothermia. Hypothermia kills about 600 Americans every year, half of whom are 65 or older, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Also, keeping the temperature at 65 or higher, even when you are not at home, will help prevent pipes from freezing.

- **Icy streets.** Navigating through icy streets can be intimidating. Wear comfortable shoes with anti-slip soles. If you use a cane, replace the rubber tip before it is worn smooth and becomes slippery on the wet ice. It may be a good idea to have someone walk with

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5 Steps to Maintain Brain Health

by Rebecca Rushing, BSN, RN

What everyone fears the most when it comes to aging is losing brain function. Maintaining cognitive ability well into old age is achievable. It isn't just due to genetics, say the experts. A lot has to do with how you live, what you eat and who you socialize with.

As a caregiver for an aging family member or loved one, it's important not only for your loved one to stay happy and healthy to maintain brain fitness, it's important for you too! Stress is known to affect your brain's functioning because stress increases cortisol levels in your bloodstream, and according to a study published in Neurology, higher cortisol levels could lead to early cognitive losses and brain shrinkage. It's possible to lower stress and reduce your cortisol levels, however it takes a concerted and ongoing effort. By taking control of their own stress and trying some of the tips below, caregivers can help maintain their brain health and their loved one's brain health at the same time.

1. Reduce sugar usage. By putting away the sugar bowl and eliminating added you can make a huge difference in your brain health. But if you want to be even more careful, look at the prepared foods you eat and only select foods with little or no sugar in the list of ingredients. Studies show the harmful effects of sugar on the brain include slowed cognitive function and deficits in memory and attention.

2. Follow the Mediterranean diet. The Mediterranean diet has gotten a lot of press for increasing the lifespan of those who follow it closely, but it's also a great diet for brain health. The diet contains large amounts of fruits, vegetables, olive oil, legumes, and moderate amounts of wine, dairy and fish. Red meat and poultry are only allowed in limited amounts. The scientific journal *Neurology* published a study showing older adults following the Mediterranean diet retained more brain volume over a three-year period than those who did not.

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3. See your primary care physician on a regular basis. This tip is important for caregivers and their loved ones; taking care of your overall health will keep your brain healthy too. NIH recommends getting all health screenings, vaccines and tests recommended for your age group.. Having a primary care physician managing your physical health will help prevent health problems like diabetes, high blood pressure and high cholesterol, which all affect brain health.

4. Get plenty of quality sleep. Lack of sleep adversely affects both physical and mental health, and it can have a profound effect on your cognitive abilities. Studies show that sleep problems can lead to trouble with memory, concentration and other cognitive functions. Lack of sleep also impacts everyday life, causing stress to the immune system, making it easier to catch colds and harder to fight off illness.

5. Stay as social as possible. Studies show that social isolation can lead to depression and cognitive decline in older adults. Caregivers and their loved ones need to keep those social connections active, whether in person or via other modes like Zoom or Facebook, etc. This is so important because a lack of social connections is directly related to anxiety and other psychological issues. If you notice a lack of engagement or signs of depression in your loved one, alert their primary care physician immediately, and discuss ways you and your family can help. Depression is not a normal part of aging. As a caregiver, maintaining your own brain health is important too. Taking care of yourself is critical because your loved one depends on you to be at your best, both physically and mentally.

you during those days.

- **House fires.** Make sure your smoke alarms are working. You should also have working carbon monoxide alarms.
- **Falling in the home.** Winter means fewer hours of daylight. Older people often need brighter lights in the home. You may also have difficulty adjusting to changes in light, and different levels of lighting may increase the risk of slips and falls. Make



sure there are no great lighting contrasts from one room to another. Also, use night lights, especially in the bathroom, and don't have loose extension cords lying around—tape them to the floor. Make sure rugs are not wrinkled or torn in a way that can trip you as you walk.

- **Strenuous activities.** Try to avoid strenuous activities like shoveling snow. You should ask your doctor if this level of activity is advisable. If you must shovel, warm up your body with a few stretching exercises before you begin and be sure to take frequent breaks throughout.

● **Dehydration.** Drink at least four or five glasses of fluid every day. This should not change just because it is winter. You may not feel as thirsty as you do in the summer months, but as you get older, your body can dehydrate more quickly, putting you at greater risk for complications from a number of illnesses and also changing how your body responds to some medications.

- **Winter itch.** This usually occurs because of dry skin. Wear more protective creams and lotions to prevent the dry and itchy skin commonly experienced in the colder months when humidity levels are lower. You should apply them after bathing and then daily.

● **Home emergencies.** For older persons living alone, it is a good idea to have a way to communicate quickly with other persons or medical personnel. If you have a cell phone, keep it handy. Another option is a personal emergency response system—a device worn around the neck or on a bracelet that can summon help if needed.

- **If you are a caregiver,** please remember to check on your loved one frequently. Offer to shop for her or him and check on medications when the weather is very cold and snowy. And remind any person who interacts with her/him to get a flu shot.

What's the difference between Alzheimer's and dementia?

Story by Nikki-Anne Wilson

Changes in thinking and memory as we age can occur for a variety of reasons. These changes are not always a cause for concern. But when they begin to disrupt daily life, it could indicate the first signs of dementia. Another term that can crop up when we're talking about dementia is Alzheimer's disease, or Alzheimer's for short.

What is dementia?

Dementia is an umbrella term used to describe a range of syndromes that result in changes in memory, thinking and/or behavior due to degeneration in the brain. To meet the criteria for dementia, these changes must be sufficiently pronounced to interfere with usual activities and are present in at least two different aspects of thinking or memory.

For example, someone might have trouble remembering to pay bills and become lost in previously familiar areas.

So, what's Alzheimer's then?

Alzheimer's is the most common type of dementia, accounting for about 60-80% of cases.

So, it's not surprising many people use the terms dementia and Alzheimer's interchangeably.

Changes in memory are the most common sign of Alzheimer's and it's what the public most often associates with it. For instance, someone with Alzheimer's may have trouble recalling recent events or keeping track of what day or month it is.

We still don't know exactly what causes Alzheimer's. However, we do know it is associated with a buildup in the brain of two types of protein called amyloid- β and tau.

While we all have some amyloid- β , when too many builds up in the brain it clumps together, forming plaques in the spaces between cells. These plaques cause damage (inflammation) to surrounding brain cells and lead to disruption in tau. Tau forms part of the structure of brain cells, but in Alzheimer's, tau proteins become "tangled." This is toxic to the cells, causing them to die. A feedback loop is then thought to occur, triggering production of more amyloid- β and more abnormal tau, perpetuating damage to brain cells. Alzheimer's can also occur with other forms of dementia, such as vascular dementia.

Vascular dementia

The second most common type of dementia is vascular dementia. This results from disrupted blood flow to the brain. Because changes in blood flow can occur throughout the brain, signs of vascular dementia can be more varied than the memory

changes typically seen in Alzheimer's.

For example, vascular dementia may present as general confusion, slowed thinking, or difficulty organizing thoughts and actions.

Your risk of vascular dementia is greater if you have heart disease or high blood pressure.

Frontotemporal dementia

Some people may not realize that dementia can also affect behavior and/or language. We see this in different forms of frontotemporal dementia. The behavioral variant of frontotemporal dementia is the second most common form (after Alzheimer's disease) of younger onset dementia (dementia in people under 65). People living with this may have difficulties in interpreting and appropriately responding

to social situations. For example, they may make uncharacteristically rude or offensive comments or invade people's personal space. Semantic dementia is also a type of frontotemporal dementia and results in difficulty with understanding the meaning of words and naming everyday objects.

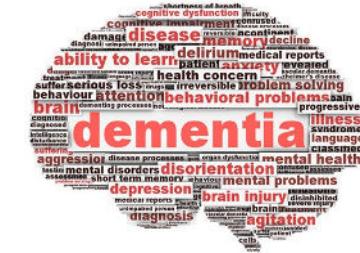
Dementia with Lewy bodies

Dementia with Lewy bodies results from dysregulation of a different type of protein known as α -synuclein. We often see this in people with Parkinson's disease. People with this type of dementia may have altered movement, such as a stooped posture, shuffling walk, and changes in handwriting. Other symptoms include changes in alertness, visual hallucinations and significant disruption to sleep.

Do I have dementia and if so, which type?

If you or someone close to you is concerned, the first thing to do is to speak to your provider. They will likely ask you some questions about your medical history and what changes you have noticed. Sometimes it might not be clear if you have dementia when you first speak to your doctor. They may suggest you watch for changes or they may refer you to a specialist for further tests.

There is no single test to clearly show if you have dementia, or the type of dementia. A diagnosis comes after multiple tests, including brain scans, tests of memory and thinking, and consideration of how these changes impact your daily life. Not knowing



what is happening can be a challenging time, so it is important to speak to someone about how you are feeling or to reach out to support services.

Dementia is diverse

As well as the different forms of dementia, everyone experiences dementia in different ways. For example, the speed dementia progresses varies a lot from person to person. Some people will continue to live well with dementia for some time while others may decline more quickly.

There is still significant stigma surrounding dementia. By learning more about the various types of dementia and understanding differences in how dementia progresses, we can all do our part to create a more dementia-friendly community.

Keep Homebound Seniors Agile

by Carol Nelson, RN, BSN, MBA

Whether it's illness, physical limitations or a reluctance to venture out, many seniors find themselves homebound, which can cause physical and emotional challenges for both the senior and caregiver. There are a variety of activities available to keep your loved one physically and mentally agile. Here are a few ideas to help your loved one beat boredom, stay nimble and get emotional satisfaction:

Try yoga or light exercise

There are plenty of physical activities you and the senior you care for can participate in together, which helps both of you stay in shape. Check with your loved one's doctor about limitations before starting any exercise routine and make sure you don't push your loved one too much.

Host a game night

Get some of your senior's favorite board or card games together and invite friends or family over to participate. Table games can provide mental stimulation as they require the players to enact strategy, answer questions, count items and sometime even perform minor tasks.

Start a book club

Not only will reading the books keep your loved one's mind active, joining in on a discussion about the plot, character development and deeper meaning of the book will provide them the ability to participate.



Have a movie night

Find two or three of your loved one's favorite movies, pop some popcorn, dim the lights and spend a few hours delving into some Hollywood magic.

Spend an evening with a hobby

If your loved one is interested in arts and crafts or even something more physical like dancing, spending an evening or two a week developing a hobby is a great way to stay fit.

Take up meditation

Aging can sometimes cause sadness, especially if your loved one is also homebound. A good way to alleviate some of these stressors is meditation. Meditation exercises can lower the heart rate, blood pressure and stress hormones and can increase oxygen levels.

Enjoy cooking together

If your senior is able, another great and productive pastime is cooking. You and your loved one can plan meals, go online and order the ingredients and spend an evening cooking together.

Try indoor gardening

If your loved one used to enjoy gardening in his or her younger days, you can always incorporate an indoor garden to help pass the time and stimulate conversation. Gardening requires movement and dedication, which leads to a healthy routine.

Talk to loved ones online

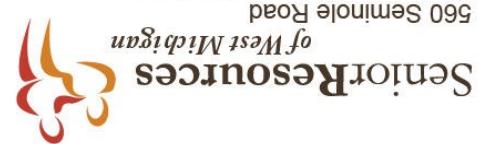
Try using Skype, Facetime or Zoom to facilitate face-to-face conversations so your loved one can interact with others on a regular basis.

Health and happiness to you and yours in the new year ahead!



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