



FAMILY CAREGIVER NEWSLETTER
DECEMBER 2012

Support Group and Event Information Inside

The Powerful Caregiver

This column is named after the class "Powerful Tools for Caregivers", a six-session workshop on helping caregiving families thrive (not just survive). It is offered in Racine County several times a year

Taming the Holidays

Jennifer is a 48-year-old accountant. She lives with her 16-year-old daughter Tiffany. She has a 2-year-old grandson who lives across town. Jennifer's mother Helen is 78 and has Alzheimer's disease. Her father Harry, 84, is Helen's primary caregiver. He has diabetes and coronary artery disease. Every day before and after work Jennifer stops in to check on her folks, take them food, and help Helen get dressed in the morning and ready for bed at night. On week-ends she takes her parents on errands and tries to attend Tiffany's school activities. The holidays are coming, and Jennifer, being the oldest daughter, wants to carry on all the family traditions. She plans to have the extended family at her beautifully decorated house for a festive dinner and gift exchange. Lately she wonders how she will ever manage her daily routine and the extra tasks that are expected of her this time of year. Work is busier than usual. Then there is the shopping, gift-wrapping, decorating, baking, cooking, cleaning - and on and on. Lately she has had difficulty getting to sleep, and she wakes about 3 AM worrying about all kinds of details. She feels irritable a lot and snapped at Tiffany for no reason one evening. At work she has difficulty staying awake and concentrating. The other day her boss chided her for being behind in her work tasks. She feels so sad that her mother can no longer lead or even enjoy the family's festivities. Jennifer also has physical symptoms she tries to ignore like headaches and digestive discomfort. She scolds herself for not being able to "buck up" and help her family enjoy the holidays.

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Don is 82 years old, a retired carpenter, and primary caregiver for his wife Eleanor, who has right-sided paralysis, related to a stroke this past spring. Don helps Eleanor bathe, dress, and get from one place to another. He also keeps house and cooks as best he can. He has respiratory problems that are worsened by both physical exertion and emotional stress. His daughter Eva lives across town and helps whenever she can. His son Chip called last night from Colorado to say that he and his family are planning to come and stay with Don and Eleanor for Christmas. Don is looking forward to seeing the family. He is wondering how he will get the Christmas decoration on the outside of the house as he has done every year since the children were young. It occurs to him, too, that this year he will have to do most of what used to be in Eleanor's department - cooking, baking, housecleaning and decorating ...and what about gifts for the grandchildren? Don is so sad about the changes the stroke has caused. Between the sadness and worry, he feels almost paralyzed himself, unable to even start on holiday preparations. He sometimes wakes at night and cries.

Holidays and caregiving can add up to OVER-THE-TOP STRESS, can't they? Besides being a caregiver, you may unwittingly give yourself the impossible task of making everything perfect for everybody you know and love. Such an assignment calls for ignoring your own stress. Ignored stress can damage your health, your relationships, and your ability to give good care. So please **address your stress** in your holiday plans. Here are a few suggestions:

### **Know Your Own Early Warning Signs of Stress**

You may feel a stiffness in your neck or shoulders; digestive discomfort, irritability, or fitful sleep. It's easy for a busy caregiver to ignore these signals, leaving them in the background until they become severe enough to be debilitating. The wise caregiver notices the first warning twinges of stress and decides to address it right away.

### **Find the Sources of Your Stress**

It may seem like the source of holiday stress is the need to hang colored lights on the porch, bake a hundred cookies, and prepare beautifully wrapped gifts. But as you look deeper, you may discover that the real source is that you've assigned yourself the task of making everyone's holiday perfect "just like it used to be." At the same time, like Jennifer, you may be employed and trying to start new traditions for your grandchildren. You are trying to play several life roles – keeping up old traditions while coping with life in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century!

### **Take Action**

A good first step is to talk to someone who understands – a good friend, a support group, a counselor, or an online community. Talking can be done in person, over the phone, or online. A good conversation can be cleansing, and you may come away feeling renewed and ready to change something in your situation.

### **Make Changes**

Ask for the serenity to accept the things you cannot change, courage to change what you can, and wisdom to know the difference. You cannot change your loved one's illness or the personality of an unhelpful family member. You can change your expectations of yourself and modify some holiday traditions.

**Set Limits** – Use descriptive "I" messages e.g. "Because of Mother's care needs, I'm not able to cook a big holiday dinner this year."

**Ask for Help** – Be specific and direct: ("I need someone to stay with mom for 2-3 hours so I can do some shopping. Would you be willing to help?") Then express appreciation.

**Simplify festivities** - Make an "Old Year's Resolution": This year I will **Practice Simplicity**. You may want to use a list to evaluate what traditions must remain the same and what can be modified. Make three columns:

What We Do	Why We Do It	How We Can Simplify It
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Then have a conversation with those who are interested in helping with preparations.

Here are a few examples of Merriment Modifications:

- Perhaps gift-giving can be reduced. Cash or gift cards may be more sensible than endless shopping and gift wrapping.
- You could start a new potluck tradition for the holiday meal or just have some snacks available for casual visits. NOTE: For many care receivers, large family gatherings are nerve-wracking and confusing. A few friends or relatives at a time make for a more enjoyable visit.
- Decorating can be simplified. Learn to enjoy the neighbors' blinking baubles without feeling you must "keep up". (You may also enjoy watching those good folks un-decorate later!)

### Use Community Resources

Purchasing services such as housekeeping or hiring help with caregiving can save a caregiver's sanity and health, and it enhances festivities for everyone. If paying for services is a problem, you may ask for them as gifts.

### Address Sadness

Family changes often cause feelings of grief during holidays. Remembering better times can bring a mixture of emotions from sadness to anger to thankfulness. Emotions are neither good nor bad. They just are. It's best to recognize feelings, and express them.

Fond memories can bring sadness for what is lost or they can bring gratitude for what has been or for what still remains. Try to choose mostly gratitude.

## ***Community Resources***

*This column highlights some of the many resources in our community. For more, see the Community Resource Directory available from the Aging and Disability Resource Center (638-833-8777) or [www.adrc.racineco.com](http://www.adrc.racineco.com))*

The **Aging and Disability Resource Center** now officially resides at 14200 Washington Avenue, Sturtevant 53177 (in Ives Grove). The new phone number is: **262-833-8777**.

**Skillbank** – is a network of people in the community who have specific services to offer e.g. home repair or household tasks. You may find help with some holiday-related tasks here. Reasonable fees are set by the Skill Bank worker and the client. Call **262-898-8900** for information and help.

**Alzheimer's Association Helpline** (800-272-3900) Here, dementia experts are available at all hours to help plan family events that include a family member with memory loss and ease the strain on the caregiver.

**Share The Care** – This is a model for organizing friends, family, and helpful community members into a team that can perform some of the endless tasks that a family caregiver is faced with. As a caregiver, you could ask for a Share the Care Team as a gift! If anyone has questions about this, have them call: **262-833-8762**.

*Let's hope Jennifer and Don can make realistic plans for their holidays with a few changes in expectations and enough help from their families. They might find resources like Skillbank or other household services helpful as well, both now and into the new year. And I wish each of them a Share-the-Care Team!*

## **Support Groups for Family Caregivers**

**First THURSDAY 10:30AM-12Noon**

**Alzheimer's Association Group — DEC. 6**

**For Families Dealing with Alzheimer's and other Dementias**

Lincoln Lutheran Office Building, 2000 Domanik Dr, 4<sup>th</sup> Floor

**First FRIDAY 12N-1PM** **DEC. 7**

**"Caregiver Connection" Telephone Group**

Call 262-833-8762 to pre-register.

**Second Tuesday 1:30-3:00 pm** **DEC. 11**

Yorkville United Methodist Church

17645 Old Yorkville Rd (3 Miles West of I-94, Just N. of Highway 20)

**Second Saturday 10:30AM-12N**

Atonement Lutheran Church, 2915 Wright Ave, Racine (Note New Location)

**Third Wednesday 1:30-3:00 PM** **DEC. 19**

Burlington Senior Center, Eppers Room, 209 N. Main St

**Third Thursday 6:00-7:30 PM**

**Alzheimer's Association Group DEC. 20**

**For Families Dealing with Alzheimer's and other Dementias**

Atonement Lutheran Church, 2915 Wright Ave, Racine (Note New Location)

*I wish you peace, joy, and the courage to find the help you need. I wish you the ability to let go of the past and future and enjoy the gift of each present moment. I wish you the capacity to appreciate and tenderly take care of yourself.*

*Peace and Joy to YOU, Dear Reader!*

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