



FAMILY CAREGIVER NEWSLETTER
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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

When "the Blues" Take Over

Jennifer is a 48-year-old accountant. She lives with her 16-year-old daughter Tiffany and 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 and help them. On week-ends she takes her parents on errands and tries to attend Tiffany's activities. Lately she has had difficulty getting to sleep, and she wakes around 3 AM worrying about all kinds of things. She is irritable a lot and snaps at people. At work she has difficulty staying awake and concentrating. She eats "junk food" mindlessly. Her main feelings are sadness and dread. Sometimes she wishes her life were over.

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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. Don helps Eleanor bathe, dress, and get from one place to another. He also keeps house and cooks for Eleanor, although he has no appetite himself. Don is so sad about the changes the stroke has caused that he no longer enjoys anything. When his buddies invite him for lunch, he quickly declines. He sometimes feels paralyzed himself. Don's daughter Eva visits when she can. She wants to help, but Don declines her offers of assistance. She is worried about her father and the changes she has noticed in him.

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Don and Jennifer are both stressed-out caregivers who have signs of depression (sometimes called clinical or major depression). This condition is defined by Mayo Clinic educators as "a medical illness that causes a persistent feeling of sadness and loss of interest." It may be characterized by inability to experience pleasure; a sense of hopelessness; low self-esteem and feelings of worthlessness; and even suicidal thoughts or attempts. Studies show that family caregivers are significantly more likely to have depression than their non-caregiving peers. This is a serious medical matter, NOT a sign of weakness.

Depression isn't anything you can snap out of. It affects how you think, feel, and behave. It may cause you to have trouble doing normal day-to-day activities and even make you feel that life isn't worth living. It requires treatment. Like diabetes or heart disease, it doesn't go away without intervention. The good news is that most people with depression feel better with medical treatment. It may take some time, but most depression, if treated, does not become a chronic condition.

### **Prevention:**

Feeling sad or “down in the dumps” happens to all of us, along with a variety of human emotions. Sometimes serious depression can be avoided by intentionally doing things that lift our spirits, changing pessimistic thoughts to positive self-talk, and accepting some things as they are. Caregivers have listed many things that lift their spirits, including taking a bubble bath, watching a funny movie, spending time with children or pets, having a little chocolate, talking with a friend, taking a walk, reading. The list is different for each person. It is SO VERY IMPORTANT that you have the time and space for spirit-lifting activities on EVERY day. Life without fun may lead to the inability to feel fun at all and then to damaged relationships and emotional paralysis. It can be a long road back!

Many times clinical depression cannot be prevented. There may be physical, chemical, or hereditary factors at work. So having symptoms of clinical depression does NOT mean that you “failed” to get out of the dumps by yourself. Seeking treatment for depression is a sign of Wisdom, Unselfishness, and Strength.

### **Symptoms:**

If you notice some of the following symptoms for a couple of weeks, see your health care provider:

- Loss of interest in things you once enjoyed;
  - Fatigue – being slowed down or shut down, (“lead-in-the-bottom syndrome”!);
  - Change in sleeping habits (insomnia, early-morning waking, excessive sleeping);
  - Change in eating habits (loss of appetite or overeating);
  - Crying a lot;
  - Repetitive thoughts of pessimism, guilt, or worrying;
  - Increased irritability or restlessness;
  - Difficulty concentrating, remembering, and making decisions;
  - Overuse of alcohol or other addictive substances;
  - Feelings of guilt or worthlessness; OR
- Thoughts of suicide or death. If you have these thoughts, **don’t wait!** Tell someone **RIGHT AWAY** – a friend, health care provider, spiritual leader, or professional counselor or call the **CRISIS LINE: 638-6741, or 800-273-8255.**

Depression can be insidious. It comes on so gradually that you may actually believe your life is not worth living. You may not recognize the symptoms of depression in yourself because you are lost in such beliefs. So if a friend or family member expresses concern about you, TAKE THEM SERIOUSLY, just as you would if someone said, “You look very pale. I think you should see your doctor.”

### **Treatment:**

Treatment for depressive symptoms should begin with a physical examination and lab tests to find any physical conditions contributing to the condition. Antidepressant medications, which restore chemical balances in the brain, may be necessary. Counseling, or talk therapy is also a part of treatment. Talk therapy gives you a chance to express yourself in a safe environment and to make changes, such as changing negativity to positive self-talk and accepting things you cannot change. This all takes time and a supportive, knowledgeable person on the journey with you.

### **Some Tips for Managing Depression**

- Stick to your treatment plan. Don’t make changes without professional guidance.
- Learn about depression. Knowledge is power. See the *Community Resources* section below for a helpful website.
- Observe your own symptoms and pay attention to what others notice about them.

- Get plenty of exercise and rest.
- Avoid alcohol and illegal drugs

**Coping and Support** – To maintain optimal mental health while caring for a loved one:

- Get as much help as possible.
- Express yourself – talk to a friend, go to a support group, write in a journal, visit websites for family caregivers.
- Participate in activities you enjoy.
- Practice relaxation techniques e.g. deep, mindful breathing.
- Get enough sleep (helpful hints: exercise, relaxation techniques, less caffeine)
- Treat your body well. Eat, drink, breath, exercise, and rest as though your life and your loved one’s well-being depended on it. (They do!)
- Keep fun in your daily life.

Care receivers are also prone to depression. Serious illness is a risk factor in itself. Accepting losses in one’s abilities and facing uncertain future are emotionally draining challenges. Realizing that caregiving is a strain on the family may cause the care receiver to suffer feelings of worthlessness. Often he or she lacks the opportunity or ability to express feelings. Exercise, social stimulation, and other ways of coping may not be available. So if you notice evidence that your care receiver has symptoms of depression, address this with the health care provider. Later life depression is treatable, and it’s not just a normal part of getting old.

## 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 on line at [www.adrc.racineco.com](http://www.adrc.racineco.com))*

**Family Caregiver Support Groups** provide a safe, accepting environment where you can meet others with similar experiences and feelings. You can learn from each other and realize you are not alone. There are five face-to-face groups and one telephone group (Caregiver Connection) sponsored by the ADRC of Racine County. People share thoughts, concerns, ideas and feelings. You are also free to pass on talking if you so choose. There are some tears, but there is a lot more laughter. Caregivers realize they are not alone and that they have humor no one else would get! At Family Caregiver Support Groups you can find: a warm welcome, information, honesty, encouragement, hope, and friendship. Please join us soon!

**Websites** – [www.mentalhealthamerica.net/llw/depression\\_screen.cfm](http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/llw/depression_screen.cfm) This link connects you to a screening tool you can use to help determine whether you have symptoms of depression. The rest of the website is chock full of other information about depression.

<http://www.alzconnected.org/discussion.aspx> This is part of the Alzheimer’s Association website and provides a way to connect with other caregivers of people with dementia.

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*I hope Jennifer recognizes the symptoms of depression in herself, and Don listens to his daughter’s concerns. I hope that with treatment Jennifer can enjoy time with her daughter and grandson and Don reconnects with friends. I hope they both get help with caregiving and recognize that they can have health and happiness again.*

## Support Groups for Family Caregivers

### First Thursday 10:30AM-12Noon

Alzheimer's Association Group — **JAN. 3**

For Families Dealing with Alzheimer's and other Dementias  
Lincoln Lutheran Office Building, 2000 Domanik Drive, 4<sup>th</sup> Floor

### First Friday 12N-1PM **JAN. 4**

"Caregiver Connection" Telephone Group

Call 262-833-8762 to pre-register.

### Second Tuesday 1:30-3:00 pm **JAN. 8**

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

### Second Saturday 10:30AM-12N **JAN. 12**

Atonement Lutheran Church, 2915 Wright Avenue, Racine (NOTE NEW LOCATION)  
Park and enter from back of building on South side.

### Third Wednesday 1:30-3:00 PM **JAN. 16**

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

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

Alzheimer's Association Group **JAN. 17**

For Families Dealing with Alzheimer's and other Dementias  
Atonement Lutheran Church, 2915 Wright Avenue, Racine (NOTE NEW LOCATION)  
Park and enter from back of building on South side.

## Other Events for Caregiving Families

Paulette Kisse, Outreach Specialist, will be available for two **family consultations**  
on Wednesday, **January 23rd** between 2 and 4 pm.  
at the Racine County Ives Grove County Offices, 14200 Washington Avenue. Sturtevant  
For an appointment call **Felicia Elias, 262-833-8761**

### Caregiving Relationships

A class about family caregiving and coping with challenges  
**Three Saturdays, 10:30 AM – Noon, beginning March 16<sup>th</sup>**  
**Atonement Lutheran Church, 2915 Wright Avenue, Racine**

*I wish for each of you some fun each day of the New Year!!*

**Marilyn Joyce, Caregiver Support Specialist,**  
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