



FAMILY CAREGIVER NEWSLETTER

MAY 2013

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

The Family Caregiver Support Program in Milwaukee has adopted a very descriptive logo for caregiver stress: a harried zebra whose stripes are unraveling and falling to the ground. Isn't that just what the caregiving role can feel like sometimes? Hopefully something in this issue will help you retain or regain your stripes and the rest of your identity!

The following article appeared in the newsletter of Milwaukee County's Family Caregiver Support Network. It is reprinted here with the gracious permission of the author.

Mindful Caregiving **Alison Byrne, Ph.D.**

Keynote, 2012 Caring For the Caregiver Conference, Milwaukee, WI

As a psychologist who works with caregivers, I am often asked for tips on managing caregiver stress. Perhaps a caregiving routine seems to require more hours than there are in the day. Maybe a care recipient exhibits aggressive or inappropriate behaviors, or perhaps a caregiver has neglected his or her own health in order to provide for their loved one. Many times, managing stress involves taking time off from caregiving, so that one can recharge and refresh. However, although respite and time for self-care are essential aspects of caregiver health, it is also true that some challenges in caregiving are unavoidable. How can a

caregiver manage stress when he or she is facing these daily challenges?

One of the most effective ways of managing day-to-day stress is to practice Mindfulness. Mindfulness refers to fully accepting and appreciating the present. As author James Baraz defines it, “*Mindfulness is simply being aware of what is happening right now without wishing it were different; enjoying the pleasant without holding on when it changes (which it will); being with the unpleasant without fearing it will always be this way (which it won't).*”

Being mindful in your caregiving will not only reduce your level of stress in the moment, but it will also improve your problem-solving ability, so that you are more effective when challenging situations do arise.

There are several ways in which you can be more mindful in your caregiving:

Slow Down: Many of my elderly patients complain that the “world moves too fast,” and that the people caring for them always seem to be in a hurry. Speeding through our caregiving tasks may feel necessary at times, but over the long run it means we are focused only on finishing the job and moving on to the next thing on our “to-do” list. In the process, we miss whatever beauty, peace, or happiness the present moment might hold. Practice taking your time with caregiving tasks. Be fully present in the moment, whether pleasant or unpleasant. Quiet your mind, focusing only on the task at hand. You may be surprised at how calm you feel by simply slowing your pace!

Be Flexible: Flexibility is another key to mindfulness. Unfortunately, it’s one of the first things to go when we’re stressed. Instead, we might cling to the familiar, which can prevent us from seeing new solutions. Caregivers may experience this when managing challenging behaviors in their loved one. Perhaps the techniques that worked in the past are no longer effective, but in our stressed state of mind, we feel compelled to keep using them. When the situation changes, are you able to change with it? Or do you find yourself holding on to

what’s familiar? Remind yourself of this classic statement attributed to Bruce Lee: *“Notice that the stiffest tree is the most easily cracked, while the bamboo or willow survives by bending with the wind.”*

Accept Your Lack of Control: There are many aspects of caregiving that are out of our control. When caring for a person with dementia, for example, we cannot control the course of the illness. We cannot control the countless small stressors in our daily lives, such as traffic or bad weather. And despite our best intentions, we cannot control the sometimes challenging behaviors of our loved one. Ironically, however, we often respond to our lack of control by working even harder to exert control. We may rigidly schedule our routines with the hope that nothing unexpected occurs. We may refuse offers of help, because we feel that no one can care for our loved one as well as we do. Unfortunately, trying to maintain control in this way only compounds stress and anxiety. A core component of mindfulness is recognizing those areas we cannot control, so we are free to devote our energies toward things that we can truly change.

Mindfulness in caregiving takes practice. We live in a society that values speed, multi-tasking, and control. Challenge yourself instead to slow down, increase your flexibility, and accept those aspects of caregiving that are out of your hands. You will likely improve your quality of life, and therefore will certainly improve the quality of life of your loved one.

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.

It's difficult to be mindful when you feel overwhelmed, isn't it? That's why you need all the help you can get, even if you need to pay for it. Time away from caregiving is essential. I hope you have some help from family, friends, or a paid caregiver; and/or you can use one of the great respite resources such as Harmony Club or Day Care Services for Adults. Here are some other resources that may help to take some nagging details off your mind.

Multiple trips to the pharmacy for medications that have been changed or used up can be one unnecessary chore. If you need to take your care receiver along, you find yourself trying to hurry him or her, and your "mindfulness" goes out the window. Please consider getting medication from a pharmacy that delivers. Some will do so for a very reasonable monthly fee. Some pharmacies will bring meds in packs of presorted doses (called "bubble packs" or "blister packs".) This greatly simplifies a caregiver's chore of stressful medication management. **See the "Pharmacies That Deliver" in the *Community Resource Directory*.**

Bills, Medicare/Medicaid forms, notes-to-self hurriedly jotted down in phone conversations, endless appointments, the next Caregiver Support group, etc., etc. As a caregiver, you can suffocate in paperwork, red tape, and scheduling woes. You may even question your own sanity. Well, here's good news: there are local organizations that can help. **Call the ADRC (262-833-8777)** for more information.

If your financial situation prohibits you from paying for help, you may qualify for one of the Long Term Care Medicaid Waiver programs like Family Care, to help families care for a loved one at home. **Call the ADRC (262-833-8777)** and speak with a Certified Information and Assistance Specialist.

If you don't qualify for a Long Term Care Medicaid Waiver program and have no volunteer help, please consider purchasing assistance with some of the endless chores. The primary caregiver's health and peace of mind is one of the best investments a caregiving family can make. In the long run, it can save money, relationships, health, and even lives!

Support Groups for Family Caregivers

First THURSDAY 10:30AM-12Noon

Alzheimer's Association Group — MAY 2
For Families Dealing with Alzheimer's and other Dementias
Lincoln Lutheran Office Building, 2000 Domanik Drive, 4th Floor

First FRIDAY 12N-1PM

MAY 3

"Caregiver Connection" Telephone Group

Call 262-833-8762 to pre-register.

Second Tuesday 1:30-3:00 pm

MAY 14

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

Second Saturday 10:30AM-12N **MAY 11**
Atonement Lutheran Church, 2915 Wright Ave., Racine
Park and enter in back of building (on South side).

Third Wednesday 1:30-3:00 PM **MAY 15**
Burlington Senior Center, Eppers Room, 209 N. Main Street

Third Thursday 6:00-7:30 PM
Alzheimer's Association Group **MAY 16**
For Families Dealing with Alzheimer's and other Dementias
Atonement Lutheran Church, 2915 Wright Avenue, Racine
Park and enter in back of building (on South side).

Alison's suggestions for mindfulness in caregiving remind me of the story of a mighty ship out at sea one dark and stormy night long ago. The lookout person on deck noticed a small light in the distance, and calculated that if someone didn't change course, there would be a collision between his ship and a much smaller vessel. He signaled and signaled that small ship to get out of the way, but there was no response. They were coming closer and closer to each other, and neither captain would change course. Finally, there was a response from the small light. It spelled out in Morse Code: "I am a lighthouse."

As a caregiver, you have many lighthouses that won't or can't change no matter how hard you try. It is difficult to accept the disease process, losses large and small, and difficult people in your life. A moment of mindfulness, accepting the present moment for what it offers, can help you cope. Mindfulness is enhanced by breathing deeply and slowly. I hope you'll take more mindful moments from now on.

May I have...

Serenity

to accept the things I cannot change,

Courage

to change the things I can, and

Wisdom

to know the difference.



If you care for your body, mind and spirit, you will find the serenity, courage, and wisdom you need.

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