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Mental Health Matters: April 2025

Caring For The Caregiver

When I was a mother of an infant and a toddler, working full-time and living very far from my hometown, my mother took my ailing grandmother into her home. My widowed grandmother's physical health was failing and then she started showing signs of dementia. I could be of little help to her, and the same applied to my brother, who had a young family of his own and worked full-time while attending law school.

I give all those details about my brother and me, because I am still trying to feel better about not tending to our mother during those two long years.

While making a quick visit home during those years, I found a pillow and blanket in my mom's car. I jokingly asked her if she was going camping. Her sad and slow answer was "...sometimes I have to get away, even if it's just in the garage while your grandmother is sleeping..."

This month's column of suggestions is dedicated to my selfless and loving mother, Billie, who died of cancer several years before my grandmother. If you are a caregiver, please consider these suggestions. If you love a caregiver, it is your duty to ensure they are taking care of themselves, and to do what you can to see that it happens. The suggestions are brief—we all know them, this is a reminder to DO them.

- Let the guilt go. Putting yourself first is not wrong.
- Join a support group with other caregivers. I will include some local ideas, but call your church, ask your doctor, talk with friends. There are lots of caregivers out there.
- Focused and intentional breathing is a great stress reliever. Stretch. Breathe in slowly. Pause. Breathe out slowly.
- Laugh, and avoid negative media. Call a funny friend. Watch a few minutes of a favorite comedian each day.
- Have a couple of people as close as a tap of your phone. It may seem easier to confine yourself and the person you are caring for to the house. Don't let a day pass when you have only them to talk with/focus on.
- Sleep is vital to everyone's health and even more so when we are under stress. Have a routine of wake-up time and go-to-bed time, as best you can. A quick shower will help you relax and refresh. Avoid extreme television before heading to bed.
- Be as concerned about your own healthy eating as you are about the person you are caring for. If preparing and sitting down for formal meals is too difficult, make sure you have

fruits, veggies, cheeses, nuts, boiled eggs, and lean meats around. Taking several small meals a day may be easier for you. And hydrate, hydrate, hydrate.

- If someone asks if they can do something, say YES. You already make lists. Make one of things needing to be done. Medications picked up. Shopping done. Dog walked. Laundry done and folded. When someone says “What can I do?” grab the list and tell them. People want to help, but may not know what to do.
- If you are still working outside the home, make sure the people you work with know what you are dealing with. Set reasonable boundaries in your work life AND at home. There must be times when your answer is “no.”
- Make time for your own spiritual and emotional practice. What gives you peace? Do it. Ask your minister to visit YOU. Yoga? Meditation? Prayer?
- When you are feeling down, have a stash of positive statements to repeat. Post them on the fridge, keep a journal around and jot them down (over and over!), spread them around the house on sticky notes. “I am doing my best... I am a strong person... Today I am going to think positive... Some of the good things in my life are ___.”
- Learn from other caregivers by reading. A list of suggested books follows.
- Are you an animal lover? You already know how much better you feel with them in your lap!

Local ideas for support:

- Caring for someone with cancer? For caregiver support, call (575) 751-8927
- Caring for someone with dementia? Call (575) 770-9874 (at Taos Retirement Village)
- Grief support in Questa, call (575) 741-0805

Suggested reading materials:

- “A Caregiver’s Challenge: Living, Loving, Letting Go” by Maryann Schacht
- “Daily Comforts for Caregivers” by Pat Samples
- “Be the Noodle” by Lois Kelly
- “Chicken Soup: Living with Alzheimer’s and other Dementias” by Chad Odom

Many thanks to my incredible mom for demonstrating some of these ideas; to my daughter, currently a full-time caregiver for a woman with advanced dementia; and to the not-for-profit organization CaringBridge (CaringBridge.org), which provides support to caregivers and those they care for. And most of all, many thanks to every caregiver reading this. Thank you for sharing your love in this world that can never have enough.

Author



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Mental Health Matters: The northern Taos County communities have lost several young people in recent months. Questa del Rio News is starting a column dedicated to mental health matters. Dawn Provencher is a retired counselor. She has a master's degree in counseling and a master's degree in social work. She will be contributing to this column on a monthly basis.

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