

# Caregiver's Corner Column (November 2011)

## Caregiving and Loneliness

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Although caregiving is an act that involves no less than two people, caregiver and care receiver, it can be very lonely. Many would assume that because these two people have such a close relationship and are interdependent on one another, that neither would ever long for company or feel alone, however, that is far from the truth. In fact, both caregiver and care receiver may have feelings of loneliness throughout their journey that, if not recognized and addressed, could lead to burnout or depression.

How can your loved one ever feel lost or alone when you are constantly with him to make sure all his needs are met? It may be hard for you as the caregiver to understand or recognize these feelings in your loved one. As the caregiver, you are often overwhelmed by all of the daily tasks that must be attended to in order for your loved one to be cared for at home. It may be difficult for you to learn that despite all that you do for your loved one; that he still needs something other than what you can give. Many care recipients are lonely in the sense that they cannot get out of the house and enjoy the company of others outside the home, but also in the sense that they are dealing with their disease alone. Many people who suffer from dementia or chronic illness become scared and confused. Rather than discuss their fears with their caregivers, they keep their fears to themselves. This can contribute greatly to loneliness, as your loved one may withdraw from friends and family in order to keep their fears from surfacing.

As the caregiver, you are constantly making sure your loved one has everything that he needs. You are rarely alone, as you are usually alongside your loved one, yet you understand what it means to feel alone. As a caregiver, your own wants and needs are often put aside so that your loved one is cared for. Going out for lunch with friends or spending a quiet evening reading a book is no longer as feasible as it was before caregiving for your loved one. Although caregiving can give you a wonderful sense of fulfillment, it can also leave you feeling very lonely. You may begin to feel as though you are the only one in the world who is experiencing what you do each day. Feelings such as loneliness these should warn you that you could be experiencing caregiver burnout. Many caregivers experience burnout during their caregiving journey; however, the way they handle it could determine whether or not they will be able to continue to care for their loved one.

How can you help alleviate feelings of loneliness for your loved one? It is important to keep the lines of communication between caregiver and care receiver open. Although caregiving keeps you very busy, make sure you are taking time to listen to your loved one. Are they feeling sad or lonely; are they showing signs of withdrawal from family and friends? If you are noticing these things, take action. Search your community for resources available for seniors. You may be

able to become involved in a group that takes caregivers and their loved ones on outings, or a group for seniors to volunteer within their communities. As the caregiver, you may find that there are an abundance of local resources for you. Community-based services such as in-home care can help you get some time off from caregiving. Adult day services can provide respite for you, while also providing personal care and socialization for your loved ones, allowing you both time to visit with others. As the caregiver, it is important to make sure you have support. Support groups for both the caregiver and receiver can help reassure both parties they are not alone in their journey. Caregivers should realize that they are not alone, and most likely cannot do everything on their own. Don't be afraid to seek out assistance and accept help when it's offered.

*Caregiver's Corner* is provided as a public service of the **Caregiver Resource Network**. The Caregiver Resource Network is a collaboration of West Michigan organizations dedicated to providing for the needs and welfare of family and professional caregivers within the community. Funded by the Area Agency on Aging of Western Michigan with Older American's Act Title III-E, Family Caregiver Support funds. For more information consult our website at [www.CaregiverResource.net](http://www.CaregiverResource.net) or call toll free at 1-888-456-5664.