

# Helping Caregiving Families

by Hanni Epp, MA

**“Last week at my church, a good friend I hadn’t seen for a while told me that her husband has been diagnosed with Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS). I was so shocked by the news that I didn’t know how to respond. When she hurried away, I found that I had offered her nothing more than a few minutes of empathy. How can I help this family to cope with this debilitating disease?” Mary M.**

## **About Mary...and her friend, Alice**

Mary and Alice had been fast friends in college. Over the years their friendship had taken a back seat to the demands of work and raising families, but they had stayed in touch. Mary had noticed that she had not seen Alice and her family in church for some time, and had been meaning to call. So, she was very glad to see her friend again, and was shocked when she heard Alice’s news.

## **What Are the Issues?**

It seems so simple – a friend or family member needs help; they ask you and you give it -- right? No, that’s not usually the way it goes. What keeps us from helping each other?

- **Isolation:** Whether the caregiver has been gradually drawn into the process, or been faced with a sudden crisis, the resulting tendency to isolate often occurs. There are so many tasks that fill every day; the caregiver has little time to think about friends and community

resources that could help.

- **Feeling Helpless:** Friends and extended family may not know how to help. They may not want to intrude in a situation that is so personal, while feeling guilty about not doing *something*.
- **Shame:** Many of us have been raised to believe that illness is not something we discuss outside of our immediately family circle. We expect that we will always be able to take care of our family members. Our expectations cause us to feel shame when our loved one's illness and need for care overwhelms us.

## **First Steps**

Consider that when you help another who is giving care, you are a caregiver, too. So, in all things, remember to take care of yourself first. That said,...

*Don't wait to be contacted:* Invite the caregiver to join you in a daily walk, yoga or tai chi session. If you can't work out a time to get together, brainstorm ways for you both to schedule exercise time and then report on your progress by telephone.

- **Benefits:** Reduced isolation, an opportunity to talk, and a feeling of shared support will develop and become as important as the more obvious stress reduction and other health benefits.

*Become a good listener:* As you become actively involved, be sure to take the time to listen closely. Your friend will appreciate the chance to talk about how

she feels. While that is healing in itself, she may also offer clues as to the areas in which she needs most help.

- Benefits: listening carefully is a way to show support, and to build trust. It is part of being a caring friend, and provides satisfaction for both listener and friend.

*Let your skills shine:* If there is something you like to do, such as cooking, shopping, driving, making telephone calls – offer to do a specific task of your choice. Here are a couple of examples, preparing a complete meal, weekly (or as often as you feel comfortable); or driving the care receiver to physical therapy appointments.

- Benefits: Everybody is a winner with this approach. You get to do something you enjoy, the caregiver gets a break, and the care receiver gets a change of pace with someone who cares about them.

### **What Else...**

Dr. Percil Stanford, in the book *And Thou Shalt Honor* said, “Whether you call it depression or burnout – you have to deal with it. Otherwise, you can’t give good care.” If your friend is showing signs of depression, such as persistent feelings of sadness and hopelessness, worthlessness or guilt, difficulty thinking, concentrating or making decisions, please urge her to check with her doctor for a depression screening. (For a more extensive list of symptoms of depression please contact me at [hanni@wmichcare.com](mailto:hanni@wmichcare.com).)

For more tips on helping caregiving families, please check the Top Ten

Tips column by Theresa Young featured elsewhere in this publication.

## **Last Thoughts...**

The emotional strain of caregiving correlates with feeling overwhelmed. When caregivers are overwhelmed, they develop feelings of guilt, anger and depression. With self-care, and the support of others, caregivers can cope. It's our challenge and our privilege to help caregivers cope better.

## **References:**

And Thou Shalt Honor: The Caregiver's Companion. Rodale Publishers. 2002.

Ed. McLeod, B.W.

Take Care! Vol.13, No. 1. Spring 2004. National Family Caregivers Association, Kensington, MD.

## **More resources**

If you want more information about resources, the Caregiver Resource Network can help. The Network's web page ([www.caregiverresource.net](http://www.caregiverresource.net)) can provide you with information about programs and services, fact sheets, and a questionnaire about caregiver strain. Or call Area Agency on Aging of Western Michigan (616) 456.5664, or (888) 456.5664.

If you have a question you would like to see addressed in a future article, feel free to contact Hanni Epp at: Caregiver's Corner, West Michigan Caregivers Alliance, 233 E. Fulton, Ste. 222, Grand Rapids, MI 49503, or e-mail at [Hanni@wmichcare.com](mailto:Hanni@wmichcare.com).

Column written by Hanni Epp, MA, LLP, therapist and consultant in private practice at West Michigan Caregivers Alliance. She is also a member of Caregiver Resource Network, a collaboration of West Michigan organizations dedicated to providing information and support for family and professional caregivers within the community. Be sure to look for the Caregiver's Corner in the next edition of Mature Lifestyles.