

Holiday Renewal for Caregivers Means Learning to LISTEN

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It is no secret that caring for a loved one makes great demands on your time and energy. As roles and responsibilities shift, you may find yourself tested in body, mind, and spirit. As another holiday season approaches, complete with calendars and lists loaded with extra things to do, plan now to make self-renewal a priority. Sound impossible? The importance of maintaining your own well-being cannot be overstated. Remember that your life is intertwined with that of the person you're caring for. Your physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being directly affect them. In other words, failing to care for yourself can create problems for your loved one as well as yourself.

Creating a workable plan for self renewal can be as easy as learning to listen to your body, mind, and heart. These are intricately connected. For example, you can improve your physical well-being by maintaining a positive outlook, but you can also improve your outlook by tending to your physical well-being. Self renewal requires attention to all three.

First, listen to your mind. Are you experiencing grief? Over thirty years ago, Elisabeth Kubler-Ross described the psychological processes of grief and sparked a better understanding of how people experience loss. As a caregiver, you've likely faced numerous losses already. Feelings of sadness, disappointment, and confusion are natural and may be intense from time to time. Ignoring these normal expressions can lead to becoming stuck in depression, anger, or isolation. So, be intentional about keeping your mind healthy. Try these suggestions. Connect with people who encourage or understand you. Attend a caregiver support group—solutions can present themselves when we share our concerns with others. Take time to do things you enjoy—reading, music, movies, a hobby. Laugh out loud. Keep a journal—writing can be a helpful tool for uncluttering a busy mind and becoming more aware of your own thoughts and feelings. Above all, don't be afraid to treat depression. A good therapist or your own doctor can help when other strategies have proven ineffective.

Second, listen to your body. Experiencing stress as a caregiver is a given, but unchecked it can have serious adverse effects on your ability to function each day and on your overall well-being. It is more important than ever to eat well. Set limits on high fat and processed foods, caffeine, and sweet holiday treats. These can actually increase fatigue. Instead, make healthier choices that include fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and milk. Exercise often. Whether you walk, run, bike, stretch, or join a class, find ways to get moving that are enjoyable and that work for you. Regular exercise will improve your health, your ability to manage stress, and will create regular breaks from your other responsibilities. Proper sleep is also important. Problems with falling asleep or staying asleep can leave you feeling tired, irritable and make you more susceptible to illness. Try

to establish a routine that is restful for you. Take naps when necessary, and don't be afraid to consult a professional if sleep problems persist.

Finally, listen to your heart. It is often during difficult times that questions about faith, hope, and God echo loudly in our minds. Life's challenges have a way of intensifying our hunger for understanding, strength, and answers. Recognize that this may be a season of growth. Even as your energy and resources are stretched thin, the experience of caregiving can offer opportunities to ignite, renew, or deepen your own faith. Discuss your situation with a pastor or attend services at a local church. Spend private moments in prayer, Scripture, and music to find refreshment and insight.

This holiday season remember to listen to your mind, body, and heart. The care of one person simply cannot be accomplished at the expense of another. Make sure you live a healthy, balanced life yourself so that you'll be fully equipped to meet the needs of your loved one. This will open the door for true celebration.

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 or call toll free at 1-888-456-5664.

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