

Caregiver's Corner Column (January 2015)

Support Groups for Caregivers

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When you think of a support group, what comes to your mind? Is it a group of sad-looking people, sitting in a lopsided circle in a dingy church basement, talking about their problems and feeling sorry for themselves? If so, you're like most of us, and most of us are wrong! Support groups are a place to share your feelings, and they sometimes meet in church basements, but they can also be full of laughter, joy, and the comfort that comes from knowing that you're not the only one.

A support group is simply a gathering of people who share a common experience, like caregiving. Sometimes led by a professional and sometimes by a lay person, the main goal of a support group is to provide mental and emotional support for the participants.

There are many proven benefits of support groups. They have been shown to improve the abilities and knowledge of family caregivers, and to improve their well-being and caregiver burden. (Gabel et al. 2010) They help combat feelings of loneliness, depression, and anxiety. Caregivers can improve their coping skills, and gain a sense of empowerment even in a situation in which they have little control. (Support groups... 2012)

In a support group, you can expect to encounter a group of people who are willing to listen to your experiences and share their own with you. Many friends and family members, while they sincerely want to be helpful, just cannot understand what you're going through. A support group offers a room full of people who are able to relate to you. Their situation might be a bit different from yours, but they will have felt the same emotions, thought the same thoughts, and learned the same lessons. They might be able to help you process what you are feeling, and will be able to offer insight that you have not yet discovered. In turn, you will offer them the same emotional mirror for their struggles and hard times.

Support groups also provide a venue for information and advice sharing. Others in the group may know of a specific caregiving technique that can help you, or they may be able to recommend a company or service that can help you or your loved one in your home. The reverse will be true as well. By caring for your loved one, you have become a caregiving expert, and your knowledge will be of great value to the other caregivers in the group.

How do you go about finding a support group? If you live in the Grand Rapids area, you can visit the Caregiver Resource Network website and find their list of local support groups (www.caregiverresource.net/support_groups). You can also call (616) 456-5664 and ask for the Caregiver Resource Network. If you live in a different location, try asking your health care provider, community center, place of worship, or other trusted professional. You can also try searching the internet for the kind of support group you are looking for.

While face-to-face interaction is usually most beneficial, online support groups are also available for those who are web-savvy or who live in an isolated area. The Alzheimer's Association has online support groups for dementia caregivers (www.alzconnected.org), and other groups can be found for other types of caregivers. Please use caution with online support groups, and never give out your personal information.

Attending a support group can be intimidating at first, but many people find them surprisingly refreshing. Don't put too much pressure on yourself or get too worried about whether you will like it or not. Just find a group that is convenient for you, make a plan to attend, and try it!

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.

References:

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