

Holidays and Stress

Even if you're not a caregiver, the threat of the holidays being right around the corner strikes instant fear, terror, and major stress into the hearts of almost everyone. However, there is hope for caregivers to enjoy the holiday season and still make it a special time for their loved one as well. The key is to pace yourself, as well as to help your loved one do the same, so that neither of you will feel completely drained, depressed, or overwhelmed, especially during such a special time of year. Here are some suggestions that may help you both survive the holidays:

Organize Your Time

Try not to schedule too many social events, one right after another. It's better to miss out on a few holiday events than to end up with yourself or a loved getting too exhausted, which could lead to health problems for both of you. Remember, when it comes to holiday events, it's the quality, not the quantity, that counts.

Make sure that your loved one gets a chance to have some quiet time away from all the noise, stress, and chaos that is a natural part of the holidays. It's best to spend some quiet time together, so that you both get a chance to unwind from recent events.

If you end up traveling away from home for the holidays, make sure to begin packing way in advance so that you'll have everything needed for the person you're caring for, as well as for yourself. Make lists and check them often prior to leaving home. Remember to have any refills on medications done early. If you're traveling by car, remember to break up the car trip with a stopover at a park or at a favorite restaurant so that your loved one can get some fresh air and feel less confined.

Watch out for holiday burnout in the person you're caring for, by taking note of unusual irritability, tiredness, or even boisterousness, depending upon their condition. Also, be aware of possible holiday burnout in yourself.

At the end of the holidays, you may notice some post-holiday blues creeping into the mood of your loved one. It's best to try and get them back into their regular, daily routines as quickly as possible, but do it gradually so that it's not too much of a shock.

Patience is always required as a caregiver, but even more patience is required during the holidays, and in order to keep yourself from stressing out too much or becoming too exhausted, it's important to try and keep your own, personal holiday schedule under control. This doesn't mean to deprive yourself of social events that you'd like to attend for yourself, but know what your limits are, know that it's okay to reduce your holiday commitments down to only a few, and don't feel guilty about telling someone "No" when asked to participate in yet another holiday function.

Shopping Alternatives

Catalog shopping is an option if you don't want to spend hours fighting the crowds at the mall.

Buy the same gift for as many people as possible on your list. If you find a gift book that would be perfect for all

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Mission

To provide a comprehensive and coordinated system of services designed to promote the independence and dignity of older persons and their families in Muskegon, Oceana, and Ottawa – a mission compelling us to target older persons in greatest need but to advocate for all.



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If you would like your copy of the *Caregiver Link* emailed or would like to discontinue receiving our newsletter, simply send your request to:

kport@seniorresourceswmi.org.

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your favorite friends, pick up a half-dozen copies. You don't always have to get everyone you know something different.

Use your shopping time as efficiently as you can, by creating and carrying a business-card sized list of gift ideas in your wallet, along with a list of gifts you've already gotten. These lists will help you from spending so much money and will also help you not buy so many unnecessary gifts.

Preparing Your Loved One

Although it's the holiday season, try to maintain the daily routine you and your loved one are used to doing.

Even before an official gathering, continually speak about the people who will be coming to visit, or who you'll be visiting, so that the person you're caring for will begin to start looking forward to some social time.

Play seasonal music around the house, and serve their favorite, seasonal food.

Let the person observe but don't try to force them into any activity beyond their cognitive capacity. Have them do a repetitive task, such as folding napkins or cracking nuts, that will help keep them calm.

If it's possible, have them help bake cookies, or decorate the tree. If they don't want to, let them stay as an observer.

Prior to the onset of any behavioral problems during a holiday gathering, prepare distractions such as a family album to draw the person's attention away from their problem.

Managing Visitors

It's also a good idea to prepare your visitors for how your loved one may react during the gathering, and what to expect from their condition. This way, it won't be shocking if relatives and friends haven't seen them for a while.



Make sure to prepare friends and relatives regarding the condition of your loved one, especially if they haven't seen them in quite a while. The behavior or condition of the person you're caring for may come as quite a shock, so it's best that everyone is informed ahead of time so that everyone is at ease and relaxed during a holiday visit.

Don't focus on how the holidays "used" to be but focus instead on what a wonderful gift it is to have your loved one with you for yet another holiday season. The top-two priorities for you during this time of year are maintaining health and happiness, for the person you care for and for yourself as well. If you can, go ahead and buy yourself a gift, something you've had your eye on for quite a while. Try to take time off from other obligations and responsibilities to re-energize during this season.

Have smaller gatherings; this will help reduce the noise and stress level for you both. It's okay to set limits, and make sure that everyone in the family, as well as friends, understand what you need as a caregiver during this time. Don't be afraid to ask for help, and to delegate holiday tasks among family and friends. Don't spread yourself too thin by volunteering to help others. It's okay to say no, and when you do, make it short and simple, and don't apologize; it should be abundantly clear as to why you can't do something, until you have extra time on your hands (and when is that really going to happen?). Hopefully, family and friends will want to know what you want or need for the holidays for yourself. Put respite at the top of your list as what you'd like to receive the most.

Gifts For You

A day at the spa - a day of massages, facials, manicures, and pedicures would be a perfect gift. Caregivers are often so busy meeting everyone else's needs that they overlook their own needs. A service that is totally self-indulgent is a rarity to someone who normally thinks of others first.

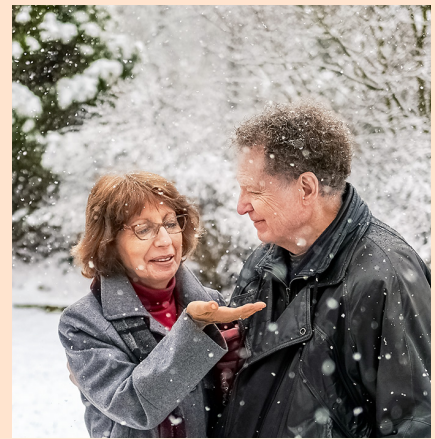
Gift card for streaming movies - this is a great way for you to catch up on some of the movies you may have missed at the theaters. Ask for some microwave popcorn, traditional movie candies, and maybe even a new set of pajamas to go along with the gift card, all perfect for upholding the true tradition of home theater viewing.

Gift certificate for a clothing boutique - the wardrobe of a caregiver generally consists of wash and wear clothing (for obvious reasons), so having the opportunity to shop for an outfit that is something other than cotton is a fun splurge.

Coupon good for an entire day off from caregiving duties - do anything you want to do, and don't necessarily have the day planned and structured for you, so you can experience some real freedom.

Gift certificate for a bookstore or online bookseller - this is a great gift because a new title by your favorite author can always take you to another place when you need to get away.

A coupon good for a night out on the town, including a gift certificate to a favorite restaurant, along with someone to watch your loved one could add up to a wonderful evening. ❖



December's Website

SeniorResources.trualta.com

Quotes

"Christmas is not as much about opening our presents as opening our hearts."

- Janice Maeditere

"Christmas is doing a little something extra for someone."

- Charles M. Schulz

"Peace on earth will come to stay, when we live Christmas every day."

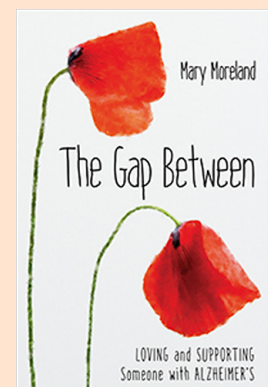
- Helen Steiner Rice

This Month's Book

The Gap Between

by Mary Moreland

Detailing her first-hand experience caring for a parent with Alzheimer's, author Mary Moreland translates her most painful journey into help for other families facing the devastating illness.



Recipe: Peppermint Meltaways

From Taste of Home



Total Time

Prep: 30 minutes plus chilling.
Bake: 10 minutes per batch
plus cooling

Yield

About 2-1/2 dozen.

"This recipe for peppermint meltaways is very pretty and festive looking on a cookie platter. I often cover a plate of these peppermint cookies with red or green plastic wrap and a bright holiday bow in one corner. And yes, they really do melt in your mouth!"

- Denise Wheeler, Newaygo, MI

Ingredients

1 cup butter, softened
1/2 cup confectioners' sugar
1/2 teaspoon peppermint extract
1-1/4 cups all-purpose flour
1/2 cup cornstarch

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More Than a Hug: How Caregiver Peers Can Support Each Other

by Kari Berit

Friends arrive with extra meals or share a coffee, meeting them for a stolen hour, somewhere close to home in case of another emergency. You part with a hug and the friend offers words of encouragement. "Hang in there." You hope you can.

The next long nights and days of managing caregiving on top of the rest of life's responsibilities go by in a blur. You are hanging on, but barely. While friends are essential, it turns out that other primary caregivers who share your emotional and physical roller coaster ride may offer the best source of help. And even on your most frazzled days, you may be a source of help to them as well.

If you need more than a hug, read on.

Asking for help is not easy for family caregivers (or many of us, really). When we understand that we don't have to be the expert in this thing called "family caregiving," we can transform our role as a family caregiver.

Taking care of family is generally ripe with guilt. Guilt for not doing enough, not spending enough time, not having the right tools, not being able to juggle all the many hats one wears. When the weight of playing this role becomes all consuming, the family caregiver isolates themselves—turning down coffee invitations, date nights and workouts at the gym. "There's no time," the dutiful family caregiver cries. But the moment you surrender the notion of being "The One" to handle it all and ask for help, you are becoming a less stressed-out caregiver.

We are not trained to care for our parents. We don't know what to do when the people who were the ones in charge become the ones who need the care. And while many of us may feel strongly that it is our duty to care for them, that doesn't mean we have the knowledge or heart to handle the myriad of roles caregiving demands.

Knowledge is one thing. We can learn about a disease or how to set up a medication box. But taming our emotions requires a strong support team. How do we deal with caring for a father who may have abused us or was simply absent from our lives? Or a mother who was an alcoholic and now needs our care? Or how do we convince our siblings that they need to help, too?

That's the worst-case scenario. It may also be that you love your parents and get along famously with your siblings, but still feel overwhelmed and underprepared to step up to the role of caring for Mom or Dad.

Today there are more people over 65 than teenagers and a higher number of people over 85 than under five years old. Demographics don't lie. We are becoming an older nation. It shouldn't be news to anyone, but because we strive to put off, ignore or hide aging, we tend to also turn a blind eye to the aging around (and within) us. Because of this, we are "unexpected" caregivers. We either say our parents are "just aging," or we blame all their issues on aging. Aging, in and of itself, is not the problem; rather, it's the diseases that can accompany us into older age that cause loved ones to need care.

Americans, like in many nations, will be forced to depend on family, friends, and other potential caregivers. In 1990 there were 11 potential caregivers for



each person needing care. In 2050, that ratio will be four to one. More informal caregiving networks will be needed, such as churches and local communities, to offer information and support to those providing care to aging adults.

Instead of organizations leading the support, however, I encourage caregivers to consider hosting peer-to-peer caregiver support groups. Peer-to-peer support groups provide so much more than other caregiver resources. Other caregivers have valuable insights, can empathize, and let us all know that we are not alone in our struggles.

A couple years ago, the Lutheran Endowment for the Elderly at ELCA Foundation provided funds to Northfield Retirement Community in Minnesota to help start some peer-to-peer support groups. Several groups ran simultaneously, and we were able to gain valuable insights and evaluation from the groups. But worth their weight in gold were the comments from members:

“My dad is widowed and lives by himself,” said one participant. “The group is a great way to share my concerns and fears as I encounter different issues in caring for him.”

“Other caregivers have valuable insights,” said another. “They share practical information about a variety of subjects, including transportation, health care and taking care of myself. These people help me to always maintain equilibrium. We all share many issues and feelings. We can empathize with each other. It’s a safe place to express oneself, even to cry.”

Following the format these groups used, we were able to develop an easily replicable peer-to-peer caregiver support group program. Any caregiver or past caregiver is a candidate for starting a peer-to-peer group. Groups can be set up at colleges, hospitals, senior centers, senior housing, church and community groups, workplaces or even at an individual’s home.

Group members are each given a turn to check in and express how they’re feeling in relation to their caregiving, without interruption or feedback. They can also pass. A discussion topic is provided to facilitate informal sharing. All information that is shared stays within the group, creating a sacred space.

If you’re feeling alone, I encourage you to consider starting a peer-to-peer group. Chances are you won’t have to look far to find someone who knows how it feels to be in your shoes. ❖

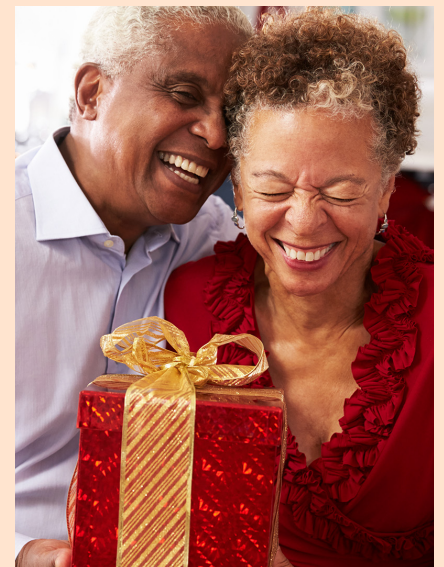
Recipe: Peppermint Meltaways, continued from page 3

Frosting

- 2 tablespoons butter, softened
- 2 tablespoons 2% milk
- 1/4 teaspoon peppermint extract
- 2-3 drops red food coloring, optional
- 1-1/2 cups confectioners' sugar
- 1/2 cup crushed peppermint candies

Directions

1. In a small bowl, cream butter and confectioners' sugar until light and fluffy. Beat in extract. In another bowl, whisk flour and cornstarch; gradually beat into creamed mixture. Refrigerate, covered, 30 minutes or until firm enough to handle.
2. Preheat oven to 350°. Shape dough into 1-inch balls; place 2 inches apart on ungreased baking sheets. Bake 9-11 minutes or until bottoms are light brown. Remove from pans to wire racks to cool completely.
3. In a small bowl, beat butter until creamy. Beat in milk, extract and, if desired, food coloring. Gradually beat in confectioners' sugar until smooth. Spread over cookies, sprinkle with crushed candies. Store in an airtight container. ❖



Dementia Caregiver Checklist

Source: Trualta

Whether you're hearing of a diagnosis for the first time or noticing changing symptoms in an existing diagnosis, it can be overwhelming. Not only are you dealing with the emotional reaction to it, but you may also be receiving lots of information from the healthcare team, friends, family, or researching on your own. It's important to take a step back and pause. All of this doesn't need to be done at once. In fact, it can be done over a few months.

Here's our recommendation for what to do after a dementia diagnosis or when recognizing new symptoms. If you've already done some of these steps, check them off:

Sit back and take time to process for 1-2 weeks. Everyone responds differently to a diagnosis and changes. Some people feel sad, scared, embarrassed, or angry. Others may feel a sense of relief that they can finally put a name to the symptoms they've been experiencing. It is rare for things to change quickly, so take time to process feelings.

Research and learn more about the diagnosis. Doing this will help you understand how the disease progresses and what to expect. You can learn helpful tips and strategies for common challenges caregivers face to make your life easier.

Follow up with the healthcare team to ask questions about the diagnosis like:

- What is causing the dementia? There are many causes of dementia. Knowing the cause will help give you a better understanding of how the disease will progress.
- Are there any additional treatments or services that are available to my care recipient? If your care recipient was advised to stop driving, talk about plans for transportation moving forward. Some options to discuss include rides from family and friends, taxis, rideshare apps (like Uber and Lyft), public transportation, private driving services, or volunteer driver programs. You can also think about ways to avoid transportation, like ordering groceries online.

Talk to family and friends about the diagnosis and how they can support you. Caregivers can experience friends and family drifting away after a diagnosis. This can happen for different reasons, like others not being comfortable around a person with dementia or because the caregiver becomes too busy. However, it's more important than ever to keep family and friends close and engaged with the care recipient. Socialization helps the care recipient's brain. It can also give you respite time in the future.



Consider This

Ask your doctor for a referral to an occupational therapist (OT). OTs can do home safety assessments and driving assessments to make recommendations that can help your care recipient stay as independent and safe as possible.

Call your local Area Agency on Aging or Aging and Disability Resource Center to find out what resources are available in your area. This might include programs that can help with shopping, cooking, transportation, cleaning, and other needs. They can also connect you with adult day programs, respite care, and caregiver support groups.

Get important legal and financial documents in order like Power of Attorney (POA) for Healthcare and POA for finances. A POA is legal document naming who can help make decisions if the care recipient is unable to. Without it, their healthcare provider may ask someone else to make decisions based on state law. It may be someone they don't want making decisions for them. It is important to have these documents ready in advance to be in control of what happens.

Get connected to resources that support you as a caregiver. There are many options available to explore, like caregiver support groups, online forums, counseling, respite care, and caregiver education.

You Don't Have to Do It All at Once

These are our recommendations. You can do them in any order you like and even add in your own steps. There's no set timeline for you to do these. You can complete them over a period that works for you. You can also talk to other caregivers who have been through this and find out what they did that was helpful to them. ❖

❖ CHRISTMAS SEARCH ❖



- Angels
- Candy Cane
- Chestnuts
- Children
- Cookies
- December
- Decorate
- Frosty
- Fruitcake
- Gifts
- Glitter
- Jesus
- Jingle
- Joseph
- Manger
- Mary
- Nativity
- Noel
- Ornaments
- Peppermint
- Reindeer
- Shepherds
- Sleigh
- Snow
- Snowman
- Star
- Stocking
- Tree
- Wisemen

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Holiday Season



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