

## Advance Directives

By Cheryl Ellis, RPFT, CRT

Trying to predict the future when diagnosed with a debilitating illness leaves caregiver and loved one with many, sometimes confusing, alternatives. Advance directives, such as a living will, can provide families with some comfort. There are online living wills that can be printed, estate lawyers who help with end-of-life planning through and designating a medical power of attorney.

In either case, advance directives are meant to give the loved one the ability to say what they prefer should they be in a position where they are unable to speak for themselves. Each state regulates their usage differently, and it is important to know how your state utilizes them.

### More Definitions

A medical power of attorney allows the loved one to designate a surrogate, or someone to speak on their behalf. It is vital that caregivers and loved ones discuss the variations fully. Simply leaving it as “I know you’ll do what’s best for me” can ultimately take the caregiver down a path where “what’s best” and what the loved one would want to oppose one another.

### A Possible Alternative

- Hospice may be one alternative when advance directives fail. Compassionate end of life service allows the caregiver to know necessities are being met without extensive measures.
- Caregivers may be taken aback by hospice employees who clearly state that hospice does not “correct” or “cure” the illness. Once past this blunt statement, caregivers can find relief that there will be continuous care, and the loved one will not suffer needless pain.
- This was the option Annie chose for her mother. She didn’t realize it at the time, but it was hospice care, not a nursing facility, that would meet her mother’s wishes. Everything would be done to keep her attended and free of pain. Minor

problems would be addressed by the hospice physician. There would be no extensive measures with possible complications that would require other extensive measures.

- While Annie’s mother preferred her life to be prolonged by any available means, no one had considered that more procedures might create problems that would deteriorate her permanently.

### Calculating The Odds

- Discussing advance directives can be an uncomfortable topic, and predicting the various turns health might take can be unclear. Updating advance directives yearly can offset the discomfort of approaching a tough subject. It also helps with determining which options might be best for the foreseeable future.
- Caregivers must also consider advance directives for their own needs. While one’s health may be in top shape at one time, other factors may come into play where the caregiver

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needs a healthcare advocate. The loved one being cared for may be completely unable to handle such decisions. Managing one's own possible needs is another aspect of caring for the loved one.

### Where Trust Lies

■ Technology has grown exponentially since the 1960s, and while we still place our faith in doctors and medicine, it is our family members who end up making the final decisions. Unless a medical case has been taken over by the court system, doctors will provide information and guide family to a competent decision. Still, we may not “like” the doctor assigned to a loved one's case, or there may be other factors that interfere with being able to stop extensive treatment regimens.

■ Keeping family abreast of changes in decisions, understanding different treatment options, and other needs can be done via Lots Helping Hands or CaringBridge - free online services. Everyone can follow up as they choose. It is also a way for the primary caregiver to stay in touch with any secondary advocates.

■ Whether caregivers choose to use an online service or simply notify key individuals, it is important to keep a copy of the advance directives on hand and easy to find. Giving a copy to one or two individuals who can be prepared to show the directives if caregivers cannot find their copy is a backup worth considering.

### Many Kinds of Directives

■ For the loved one with mental illness, there are psychiatric advance directives. Between family and physicians, goals for care can be decided upon for the future. The National Research Center on Psychiatric Advance Directives provides state-by-state information and other useful data for caregivers and loved ones. There is even a link to testimonials about advance directives.

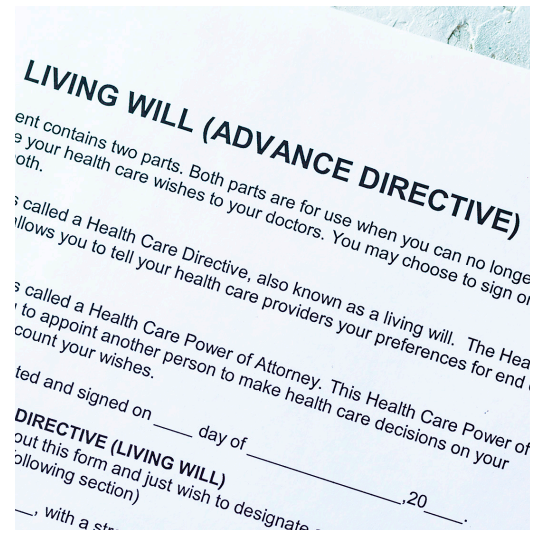
■ Knowing treatment options for physical and mental health will help caregivers and loved ones maintain a sense of control over their situations.

### Living Will

Without proper legal planning, caring for aging loved ones is often emotionally and financially distressing for everyone involved. Families struggle at the last minute to find information, guidance, and assistance to handle the complex health care, financial and legal needs.

By planning and obtaining the right legal documents, families can help their aging relatives gain security, take advantage of public benefits, and preserve their assets.

First, estate plans are key. They can help families avoid probate, which occurs when an individual owns assets in his or her name alone, and the court determines



distribution. If not handled properly, probate can be time-consuming and costly while providing no privacy for the family.

Estate plans include wills or trusts, durable powers of attorney, health-care surrogate designations, and living wills. These documents enable individuals to manage their assets during their lifetime and upon incapacity, as well as after their death. Planning can help minimize or avoid estate taxes and ensure the senior – not the state – retains control of his or her assets.

If nothing else is done, individuals should obtain advance directives. These documents help ensure their wishes are carried out (financially and medically) in the event of their incapacity.

#### Advance directives include:

- **Living Will:** Documents an individual's wishes concerning prolonging life through artificial means when there is no other hope of recovery.
- **Health-Care Surrogate:** Grants an individual's designee the power to access medical information otherwise prohibited by HIPAA
- **Durable Power of Attorney:** Gives an individual the power to direct the giving of gifts, apply for Medicaid, pay expenses, access retirement benefits, and sell real estate.

Without these documents, a guardianship will likely be required. In addition to being costly, guardianships enable the judges – not the family members – to make critical decisions. In addition, guardianship courts hesitate to “gift away” a ward's assets for medical planning.

Families should work with trusted legal experts with experience handling elder law issues. Obtaining the right legal documents can eliminate the stress of caring for aging loved ones and give families a priceless asset: peace of mind. ❖



## July's Website

[www.aarp.org/aarp/caregivers](http://www.aarp.org/aarp/caregivers)

## Quotes

*“The only thing that hurts harder than a failure is not trying.”*

– A. Dubey

*“With the new day comes new strength and new thoughts.”*

– E. Roosevelt

*“Happiness is not something readymade, it comes from your own actions.”*

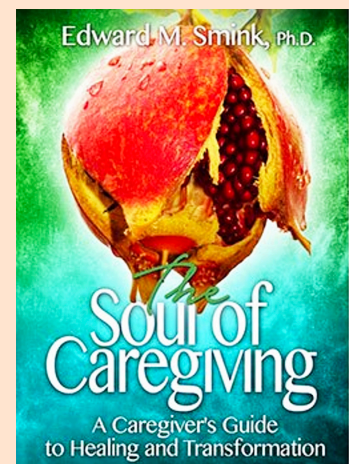
– Dalai Lama

## This Month's Book

### *The Soul of Caregiving*

by Edward M. Smink, PhD.

Who are the caregivers? We all are, for at the heart of being human is the capacity to care, to reach out to others and explore the relationships we build. *The Soul of Caregiving* is about us.



## Laughter: Medicine for the Heart

by Jane E. Maxwell

*“Laughter and tears are both responses to frustration and exhaustion. I prefer to laugh, since there is less cleaning up to do afterward.” – Kurt Vonnegut*

Laughter is like a breath of fresh air that we desperately need. This seemingly simple act affects most of your body systems. Laughter strengthens the immune system by stimulating your body to increase production of immunoglobulin. It improves your heart rate and circulation by boosting the oxygen supply to your brain. Laughter controls pain by decreasing muscle tension, distracting attention, and increasing the production of endorphins, natural pain killers. Laughter is like giving yourself an internal massage as it stimulates and soothes. It truly is medicine for the heart.

Sometime when we feel inept, like a duck out of water, in our efforts to care for our loved one, the healthiest way to respond is to laugh at our own imperfections. We are human and at times say the wrong thing, spill soup down the front of the patient’s shirt, or mess up at the most inopportune moment. But if we can’t laugh, all we do is cry.

Humor, like prayer, helps us to rise above our circumstances. Seven years ago the idea of laughter was difficult for me to apply to the care of my terminally ill husband. Because I had worked as a registered nurse for over forty years, I was much too intent on fixing the symptoms of his illness

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## Brain Exercises for Memory To Do at Home

by Kaitlyn Phoenix

Your best bet is to do all different kinds of things that exercise your brain in different ways. “Variety is great,” says Dr. Douglas Scharre, director of The Ohio State Wexner Medical Center Division of Cognitive Neurology. “The more you do with your brain, typically, the better it is.” This list of exercises for your brain can help get you started.

### 1. Work Out

It seems one of the best things you can do for better cognition is physical exercise. It increases blood flow to the brain; reduces the risk of stroke, high blood pressure and diabetes (three risk factors for developing memory problems); and lowers inflammation oxidation (which has also been implicated in dementia), according to Dr. Tan. In fact, a 2023 study of nearly 1,300 women age 65 and older found that for every 31 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity a participant did every day, she had a 21% lower risk of developing dementia. Meanwhile, a 2022 meta-analysis concluded that people who regularly participated in walking, running, swimming, bicycling, dancing, yoga, sports and exercise machines had a 17% lower risk of developing dementia than those who didn’t.

### 2. Play a Sport

If you want to take the benefits of exercise to a whole new level, consider a sport that requires you to play with other people. On top of the physical exercise, research shows that sports require you to make quick decisions and solve problems.

### 3. Socialize

Seriously, getting together with other people is extremely good for your brain. “You must use your eyes to see their expressions and nonverbal communications. You pick up things that way, and you make judgements. You’re using your language, you’re using your vision, you’re using your hearing. All these parts of the brain are being involved and integrated.” If you can’t meet in person, pick up the phone and call someone – you’ll give a little brain boost to both of you.



#### 4. Do Some Math

The next time you open the calculator app on your phone, research suggests you might want to pause for a second and decide if the math problem at hand is something you can solve without technology. In fact, one study found that senior citizens who were given basic math and reading problems to work on every day for six months experienced boosts in processing speed and executive function.

#### 5. Learn a New Language

Knowing two languages allows you to connect with others you may not have communicated with before, makes travel easier and supports a healthy brain. A 2020 meta-analysis found that people who are bilingual develop dementia at a later age than people who only speak one language. It may sound like a big commitment, but there are language-learning apps to get you started — and some are totally free.

#### 6. Become a Puzzler

Doing a variety of puzzles is the key here since different ones engage different parts of your brain, but number games, crosswords and jigsaw puzzles may be particularly helpful. Sudoku is great for logic – that’s the frontal part of the brain. Crosswords increase your abilities to store vocabulary and think of words on your verbal side.

#### 7. Play an Instrument

Performing music requires you to mix the physicality of touch with remembering and hearing – in a short amount of time. One study even found that people over age 60 who took piano lessons scored higher on tests of episodic memory and attention six months later than people who didn’t. Episodic memories are things we remember that happened in the past (whether it be 30 years ago or 30 days ago).

#### 8. Meditate

In one study, people with mild cognitive impairment or mild Alzheimer’s disease who did 30 minutes of guided meditations every day for six months showed slower degeneration in crucial brain areas than people who didn’t.

#### 9. Stimulate Your Senses

Opt for activities that require you to use several of your senses. For instance, when baking an apple pie, you might feel the dough as you form the crust, hear, and smell the apples sizzle on the stove if you pre-cook them, visually pay attention to what you’re doing as you assemble everything and then, of course, taste the fruit of your labor. Research suggests that when senses interact it helps us remember things better.

#### 10. Sleep

You may not think of it as brain exercise, but high-quality sleep is essential for our brains to function at their best. In fact, sleep helps “improve memory recall, regulate metabolism, and reduce mental fatigue. While we’re snoozing, our brain is busy removing toxins and reorganizing itself so if you don’t get at least 7 hours of high-quality shuteye night after night, don’t be surprised if you experience brain fog among other problems. If your sleep routine could use a little refresh, try these strategies for resetting your nights.

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*Laughter, continued from page 4*



and controlling his reactions to the chemotherapy and radiation. I was increasing not only my stress level, but also his.

Then as we turned on the TV and radio to some of his old favorites – “I Love Lucy,” “Abbot and Costello,” “All in the Family,” and “Mayberry RFD,” along with the music we grew up with, we began to laugh. Tensions faded, muscles relaxed, pain was lessened, and we reconnected. Laughter reminded me that one is much more than his or her illness. We are all persons first, still alive and able to enjoy levity. Joy is still possible for the patient and the caregiver.

- Try keeping a journal of humorous things you see, hear, or read.
- Place cartoons on your refrigerator or bulletin board. They will be there when you need them.
- Avoid negative people.
- Don’t put yourself down.

Call someone today to arrange to meet for a few hours to renew your spirit. It truly will be medicine for your heart.

*“A sense of humor can help us overlook the unattractive, tolerate the unpleasant, cope with the unexpected, and smile through the unbearable.” – Moshe Waldoks ❖*

## Older Adults and Alcohol

Source: National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism



A national survey found that about 40 percent of adults ages 65 and older drink alcohol. Older adults can experience a variety of problems from drinking alcohol, especially those who:

- Take certain medications
- Have health problems
- Drink heavily

There are special considerations facing older adults who drink, including increased sensitivity to alcohol. Aging can lower the body's tolerance for alcohol. Older adults generally experience the effects of alcohol more quickly than when they were younger. This puts older adults at higher risks for falls, car crashes, and other unintentional injuries that may result from drinking.

### Increased Health Problems

Certain health problems are common in older adults. Heavy drinking can make these problems worse, including:

- Diabetes
- High blood pressure
- Congestive heart failure

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*Brain Exercises for Memory To Do at Home, continued from page 5*

### The Bottom Line:

“Just doing cognitive training isn’t going to prevent you from having those things, but it might help you reduce the risk of developing symptoms.” So, it’s important to engage your brain in a variety of different ways right now so you have a little more leverage if things go south later. Along those same lines, remember that your brain works with nearly every other system in your body — it’s not a soloist. “If your heart is unhealthy, that can affect the brain because the brain is the organ that needs the most oxygen in your system,” says Dr. Zaldy S. Tan, director of the Cedars-Sinai Health System Memory and Aging Program. “If your kidneys are not functioning well, then you accumulate more toxins that the kidneys filter from the blood. If your gastrointestinal tract is not healthy, then you won’t absorb the micronutrients that the brain needs to stay healthy.” **Everything is connected so remember that when you’re trying to protect your brain, it’s best to focus on your whole body’s health.** ❖

## Pets Help to Protect Your Brain as You Get Older, Study Suggests

*By Carly Cassella*

*S*ometimes what’s good for your heart is also good for your brain.

A recent study of US adults over 50 found that those who owned a pet for more than five years scored better on cognitive memory tests than those living without interspecies housemates.

The findings from the University of Michigan suggest the ‘pet effect’ can protect more than just the health of our guts and hearts; it could also play a role in our aging brains.

The results are based on a nationally representative survey from 2010 to 2016, which, amongst other questions, asked more than 20,000 adults over the age of 50 about their pet status.

Using these findings years later, researchers showed those who ticked the pet box showed interesting differences in their cognitive scores over the six-year testing period.

The effect was only evident in participants over the age of 65, which is usually when symptoms of dementia begin to show.

If a person in that age bracket had owned a pet for over five years, researchers found their short-term and long-term memory for words was much better than those who did not have a pet but were similarly aged.



Every time participants were tested over the six-year period, the pet cohort showed better scores, even as they inevitably grew older.

The findings are only an association, not clear evidence that the ‘pet effect’ exists. It could be, for instance, that



people with better cognitive function are more likely to maintain longer pet companionships later in life.

That said, the study joins many recent studies that suggest having a pet is good for you. There are numerous theories as to why that is, all of which have yet to be proven.

Having a dog, for example, could mean pet owners are forced to get up and move about more, and daily movement is closely tied to brain health and functional longevity.

Animals also bring new bacteria into a household's circulation, which could improve our gut health for the better. Incidentally, the gut-brain connection is one that scientists have recently come to realize is far more important than we once thought.

Or perhaps pets simply make us happy. Studies suggest an animal's presence in our lives can relieve loneliness and alleviate chronic stress.

In old age, that could be more important than ever. Evidence has shown isolation can change the very structure and function of our brains.

There's even a chance all these theories are at least partly correct.

Common risk factors for dementia include physical inactivity, isolation, cardiovascular disease, depression/anxiety, and chronic stress.

In short, having a pet could help protect numerous different avenues to cognitive decline all at once.

But while most studies on pet ownership have focused on how dogs or cats impact our emotions and physical health, far fewer studies have looked at how pets impact our ability to think.

Some of those studies turned up null results. But the researchers at Michigan think that's because there's a lag in how long it takes a pet to impact our brains, and most previous studies have used short interactions with unknown dogs to test the effect.

And, as we all know, loneliness isn't conquered in a day. Nor is friendship built in a single petting session.

People shape their days around their pets, and these animal companions can impact just about every aspect of our lives.

Having someone to talk to throughout the day, even if they aren't a fellow human, could be exercising the verbal networks in our brains.

Pets could be keeping us young and fit on the inside as well as the outside. ❖

*Older Adults and Alcohol continued from page 6*

- Liver problems
- Osteoporosis
- Memory problems
- Mood disorders

### **Bad Interactions with Medications**

Many prescription and over-the-counter medications, as well as herbal remedies, can be dangerous or even deadly when mixed with alcohol. Medications that can interact badly with alcohol include:

- Aspirin
- Acetaminophen
- Cold and allergy medicine
- Cough syrup
- Sleeping pills
- Pain medication
- Anxiety or depression medicine



### **Drinking Guidelines for Older Adults**

Adults over age 65 who are healthy and do not take medications should not have more than:

- 3 drinks on a given day.
- 7 drinks in a week

Drinking more than these amounts puts people at risk of serious alcohol problems. If you have a health problem or take certain medications, you may need to drink less or not at all. ❖



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