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Holidays can add more stress for caregivers

The holidays can be a wonderful time of year for family gatherings and the embodiment of the spirit of giving. Unfortunately, many of us have a concept of the “perfect” holiday family gathering, and we strive for this, although it rarely happens just as we envision. For caregivers, this concept of holiday perfection can add more stress to the already stressful “job” of these ultimate “givers.”

The National Care Planning Council recently published an article on this subject. (The article can be found at www.longtermcarelink.net/article-2010-12-8.htm.) The author suggests some steps for caregivers to take to avoid feeling overwhelmed, frustrated, depressed, or resentful when watching other families that appear to be having a “perfect” holiday. The first step to take is to remember that you are not alone. A recent study by the National Alliance for Caregiving and AARP indicates that 44.4 million Americans aged 18 years or older are providing unpaid care to an adult. Many of these caregivers have multiple roles, such as marriage, children, and work outside the home in addition to the caregiving role. The typical caregiver in this study is a 46 year old Baby Boomer woman with some college education, who works outside the home, and spends more than 20 hours a week caring for an adult, usually a mother. The average length of caregiving is 4.3 years.

Another step is to find help. The author suggests utilizing resources such as family members, friends, religious groups, agencies, or homecare providers. The local Department of Aging may be able to provide some assistance or a list of local resources. Non-medical home care agencies can provide help with the physical care of a loved one. Family members are often willing to help, but are not sure what to do. Caregivers may present the image that they are only one who can give the best care. However, it is important to accept help that is offered (even if you need to ask for it initially), and to provide details on the type of help you need, and to be specific as to what they can and should do. A geriatric care manager can be of invaluable help in locating, and paying for, respite and other supporting services. Consultation with an elder law attorney may provide insight in ways additional care can be funded, relieving the caregiver of some of the burden.

Finally, the author reminds caregivers that to give effective care, the caregiver must care for herself first. It is necessary to keep the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual self balanced. Some ways to do this is to maintain a positive attitude, especially by adjusting expectations for the holiday season. It is not always possible to change circumstances, but you might be able to change your responses. Eat healthy food and get exercise, even if it is just walking up and down stairs. Let go of frustrations, anger, resentment and guilt. While these are common feelings for caregivers, good mental health requires that you attempt to let go of these feelings. Take time to do something you enjoy which rejuvenates you each day. Be easy on yourself. Take the chance to have someone else give you a break from caregiving duties to do something you enjoy.

The holiday season may not be perfect, or anywhere close to it, but it can still be enjoyable if you seek help and celebrate the reason you are a caregiver to begin with.