



The Caregiver Link

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QUOTES

“Many people look forward to the New Year for a new start on old habits.”

~Author Unknown

We will open the book. Its pages are blank. We are going to put words on them ourselves. The book is called Opportunity and its first chapter is New Year's Day.

~Edith Lovejoy Pierce

One resolution I have made, and try always to keep, is this: To rise above the little things.

~John Burroughs

A Kinder, Gentler, Resolution

It's that time of year again when we are all expected to make resolutions to better ourselves. Seems they are never fun resolutions either, like skip your exercises or eat more chocolate. They are always hard, even unrealistic ones like lose 100 pounds before April.

This would be a good year for all caregivers to make a kinder, gentler resolution; that is, to be kinder and gentler to themselves. As anyone working in the medical field knows, there are countless caregivers whose dedication to their caregiving tasks threatens their health, sometimes their very lives. Too many of them actually do die before the loved ones who received their selfless care.

This brand of extreme caregiving - can validly be called self abuse. Not a label any caregiver would want to embrace, of course. “What can I do?” you may ask. “My loved one needs constant care and I'm the only one able or willing to give it!” That makes sense on the surface but stick with us while we examine this issue to see if there may be a kinder, gentler way.

One form of self-abuse has become popular with young people and is more accurately called self-injury. This is when they take razor blades to cut themselves or hot objects to burn themselves. This term can also refer to refusing to eat enough to stay healthy (anorexia) or other forms of self-injury. This active form of self-abuse is a mental health issue and not what we are referring to here.

Codependency is another term that has been bandied about, referring to those who do for others at their own expense. This is closer to what we are talking about but codependency has become a negative, even

insulting, term that has been so over-used that anyone who has ever lifted a finger to help another qualifies as codependent. And, what's so bad about helping others? This world is in a sad state of affairs because not enough of us are willing to lend a hand when it's needed.

In this article, we are not talking about self-injury or the run-of-the-mill codependency of folks who just want to make this a better world. We are talking about health threatening behavior in the service of a loved one. It is as if you are saying, “I will risk my health (life) for him because his life is worth more than mine.”



Of course, extreme caregivers seldom say those words. But their behavior is shouting that message from the rooftops. In fact, extreme caregiving has its roots in the low self esteem of a particular caregiver.

Typically the childhood of extreme caregivers was difficult, perhaps including alcoholic parents or other abusive or neglectful situations. At a very young age, they learned their own needs were unimportant and they were expected to tend first and foremost to the needs of others. They were raised in environments in which they were rarely, if ever, given the message: “You matter too.” And so it seems quite natural to risk their own well-being for the sake of another. They've been doing it from earliest memory.

Society doesn't help much. Worth is often evaluated on how much a person earns; not how much he or she contributes. And so day traders and oil magnets are revered,

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Caregivers New Year's Resolution

In this New Year, I will.....

Learn to take one hour out of each day just for myself to read, enjoy a hot bath, journal my thoughts or call a friend.

Attend at least one caregiver support group to realize that I am not alone and that I can learn from others.

See my doctor for a physical exam and give my own health needs more priority.

Use respite care at least once a month so that I may get a break and be refreshed. I will consider using the time I have to discover the benefits of massage therapy, the joy of a musical concert, self-expression in a painting class or a day at the spa to find stress relief.

Eat a balanced diet and exercise at least 20 minutes three times a week even if all I can do is walk around the house, up and down the stairs or exercise from a chair.

Seek out one new resource to support my caregiver role such as chore services, housekeeping, home care programs or delivered meals.

Try to find a way to laugh or find humor in the day amidst the sadness or discouragement I may feel.

Reach out to my family and friends to help with my loved one so that the weight of my responsibility can be lifted and shared. One way I can do this is to keep a list of needs handy so that when help is offered, I can be ready with an answer.

Seek spiritual support or personal counseling to gain perspective of my life, clarity of my role and keep my mental health in check.

Finally, by focusing on these resolutions, I will be able to reap the rewards of caregiving, maintain balance in my life and provide care longer for my loved one.

by Kristine Dwyer, LSW

HAPPY NEW YEAR



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Even if they are not honest in what they do...even if they harm society rather than help it. (Of course, if you want to turn this dollar based philosophy on its head and figure how much your family is saving through your willingness to provide caregiving services, the figures may startle you. To have a visit from a bonded and insured caregiver aide, you will need to cough up \$15-\$25 an hour, usually with a 3-4 hour minimum. Live-in help costs \$160-\$250 per day, nearly the same cost as a nursing home. When you put it in these terms, your services are worth plenty!)

But healthy self-esteem doesn't come from facts or what others think. It comes from within and, for those who were taught from earliest memory they weren't worth much, maintaining a healthy sense of self is a daily struggle. Some simple suggestions that may help are:

1. Watch—first and foremost—what you are thinking. The thoughts that swirl through our brains every waking moment are called “self-talk” and, when they are negative, these thoughts can be our worst enemies. It is amazing how mentally unkind we can be to ourselves, heaping on judgment and criticism we wouldn't dream of saying to any other human being. Monitor these thoughts and, when you notice negative self talk, tell yourself, “I will not allow myself to be more unkind to myself than I would to anyone else.” Follow this up with an activity that takes your mind off these thoughts so that you break the negative pattern. You will need to be vigilant for some time to break a well-entrenched pattern of self chastisement.
2. Give yourself positive affirmations daily. Affirmations are positive statements that, when repeated several times a day, reprogram our thinking in a healthy way. Many studies have proven this technique works when done every day for three weeks. Write a statement or statements (see the companion article for examples) on an index card you carry with you at all times and read the statements slowly and thoughtfully at least five times a day.
3. When faced with a caregiving conundrum, use the Dr. Phil technique. Picture another caregiver on the doctor's show talking about the decision you need to make. For example, your physician has told you full time caregiving is affecting your health in serious ways and you can't keep this up. But, before your loved one got so ill, you promised you would never put him in a nursing home. Would you tell that other

Caregiver to risk death on the strength of a promise made before all the facts and costs became apparent? Sometimes distancing ourselves from the situation can help us disengage low self-esteem long enough to make a reasonable decision. This technique can be used with both large and small issues.

4. Fake it until you make it. You will feel uncomfortable the first few times you say “no” or accept help for something your low self-esteem says you “should” have done yourself. This discomfort is only natural because you are entering unfamiliar territory. But it doesn't mean the new behaviors are wrong. Only that they are new. The discomfort will abate as you get used to a new way of doing things. In effect, you will be behaving yourself into better self-esteem.

This article has used some harsh terms: self-abuse, extreme caregiving. But if your caregiving duties are threatening your health, even your life, these terms are justified, even necessary. Whether you feel it or not, your needs and health are every bit as important as those of your loved one. You deserve to have the help you need even when it costs money that is tight right now or calls upon the services of other family members who may be reluctant to offer help or goes against the wishes of your loved one who is most comfortable with you. Your losing your health or your life helps no one.

And so let the harsh terms usher in a kinder, gentler resolution - to love and care for yourself with the same tenderness with which you bless others. And may it be a wonderful new year!

By Andrea Heeres

New Classes Coming Soon! Creating Confident Caregivers

Dementia...that dreaded word describing a progressive disease that decreases memory, rational thinking, language and social functioning.

Did you know that dementia is not a normal part of aging? However it is a common condition among the elderly and the reality is...those who provide care for these individuals have a challenging job.

Taking care of a person with a dementing illness is specialized, demanding work. Did you know that dementia caregivers are:

- * Twice as likely to have mental health

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Return Service Requested

The Mission Of Senior Resources

An Area Agency on Aging

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 counties — a mission compelling us to target older persons in greatest need but to advocate for all.

**To contact us, please call
Amy or Mary at:**

January's website: <http://www.fullcirclecare.org/>

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- problems
- * Two and a half times as likely to be taking medicine for their nerves
- * Only half as likely to seek medical help for their own health problems
- * More likely to be pinched financially
- * More likely to feel cut off from their family and friends

To do their work successfully, caregivers need special skills and knowledge. The *Creating Confident Caregiver* program is a 6-week course using a proven curriculum titled, The Savvy Caregiver that will help the in-home caregiver.

Watch for more details about this class in February's issue of *The Caregiver's Link*.

Readers Corner:

Caregiving without Regrets:
3 Steps to Avoid Burnout and
Manage Disappointment, Guilt and Anger
by Vicki Rackner MD

Whether you are caring for an aging parent, sick spouse or a stranger across the world, *Caregiving without Regrets* is for you.

