

“Humor, the Serious Side of Care-Partnering”

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It goes without saying that the role of a full-time care partner or care manager is one of life's most stressful missions. The majority of us are drafted into this unbelievably taxing and thankless vocation. Over time, negativism, pessimism and depression become the trademarks of care partnering. My question to you is, “Does this have to be the case?”

At times, it seems as if the world is not on our side. As an example, the average person is programmed to awaken every morning to an “alarm clock.” I intentionally do not have any alarm clocks in my house due to their negative connotation. Instead, I have “opportunity clocks” so that I can begin each and every day on a positive note. Unfortunately, we are conditioned in our everyday lives to think negatively and that is certainly exacerbated by our role as a care partner or care manager, as we watch our loved one or family member deteriorate so gradually and painfully before our very eyes.

Do you recall the last time that you were called into your boss’ office? I’ll bet that you started thinking negatively from the moment that you were notified that your boss wanted to see you until you actually met with him/her. The longer you waited the more negative you became. You immediately thought about anything and everything that you might have done wrong in the past few days because that is certainly what your boss wants to see you about? If we did do something wrong, it was over and done with – no amount of worry is going to change the outcome, yet many of us take the time and effort to continue to worry about it. If a tragedy has occurred, acknowledge it and try to create something positive out of that negative situation. That should be the theme for all care partners and care managers.

It is so easy for a care partner to live a life of self-pity, bitterness, hatred and hostility. That doesn’t really take much effort, if any. I truly believe that as a care partner pain is inevitable, but misery is optional. I should know having been a full-time care partner for my beautiful wife, Sarah, who was diagnosed with the “probable early onset of Alzheimer’s or a related dementia”, while she was still in her forties. Although my role shifted three years ago from care partner to that of care manager, I am still experiencing some of those same negative feelings and emotions of care partnering. These are now coupled with newfound feelings and emotions involving the loss of control and guilt as a result of having placed Sarah in a long- term care facility and literally into the “hands of perfect strangers.” My goal throughout this long, long struggle with this “mind thief” has always been to be a “survivor” rather than a “second victim” of this horrendous disease.

Many have asked me how I have survived as a care partner for so many years. I attribute my survival to “my faith in God fused with humor and laughter.” Sarah and I chose early in the progression not to engage in “pity parties,” which result in an attitude of “isn’t this awful?” “Pity parties do nothing, but lead to one’s destruction. We decided early on in our battle against this horrendous disease to meet the challenge head on and to create as many fond memories as we could, as a couple, before it was too late. We were determined to have fun at all costs and to go down laughing.

I recall my wife coming home from her office one evening shortly after her diagnosis. (She was still able to work as a Medical Assistant and drive an automobile at this stage of the disease.) She greeted me with, “Honey, I did an Alzheimer’s thing today.” She proceeded to tell me that she had locked her keys in the car when she arrived at work and had to have her office manager drive her home at the end of the day, to pick up her spare set of keys. I started to laugh and assure her that it was ok, but she quickly interrupted me to say, “But that it not all of the story – I left the car running for my entire shift.” We

both laughed about the incident and moved on to the next unusual event that was sure to follow and make us laugh. I affectionately refer to that process as the “comic defense”. It sure beats the alternative, which ends in anger, hatred, depression, hopelessness and pessimism. These emotions experienced daily and continuously will eventually lead to some type of illness or breakdown.

The sad fact is that negativism is the easier choice, but with some effort, you can consciously train yourself to replace the pessimism with optimism. You need to develop your own technique that will permit you to become “better rather than bitter.” For example, whenever I feel myself becoming negative, I immediately think about the ten most important words that I have ever learned, “IF IT IS TO BE IT IS UP TO ME.” It is your choice!

The “comic defense” is the only way to go when you are under intense stress as a care partner or care manager. Our bodies, under stress, resort to the “fight or flight” reaction which interrupts our inner balance. Laughter helps us to unwind and restore balance or equilibrium. It also strengthens our immune system. Are you aware that studies have shown that the immune system of pessimists breaks down when they are under stress and they become more susceptible to disease? At the same time, it was discovered that the immune system of optimists is unaffected by stress. That should be incentive enough for everyone to endeavor to keep a positive attitude. If it is not, consider the latest research findings that indicate that pessimistic, anxious and depressed people may have a higher risk of dementia. (Reuters, Washington, 14 Apr 05)

Laughter additionally causes your heart rate to increase, the oxygen supply to the brain is boosted and your blood flow improves. Force yourself to look for humor in everyday situations until it becomes your lifestyle and you can identify with the phrase, “Happy is the man who laughs at himself, for he will never cease to be amused.” Remember, every moment you are angry you lose 60 seconds of peace of mind. People who are angry and tense are three times more likely to die than those who are not. Your role as a care partner or care manager is serious business that requires faith coupled with laughter and humor to maintain your health and sanity.

Sarah has waged a courageous battle against Alzheimer’s disease for almost nineteen years. She rarely speaks and when she does it is a “yes” or a “no”. So much of her personality present and past has disappeared; however, her ability to smile remains. In fact, to this day, if I say, “Sarah, give me a smile,” she will normally respond with a big enthusiastic smile. If she is out of sorts, she will somehow respond with a frown or a sneer.

Finally, I will end with a short paragraph that will sum up all that I have been discussing in an effort to improve the quality of your life as a care partner.

SMILE

A smile costs nothing, but it gives much. It enriches those who receive, without making poorer those who gave it. It takes but a moment, but lasts forever. None is so rich or

mighty that he can get along without it, and none so poor but he can be made rich by it.

A smile creates happiness in the home, fosters good will in business, and is the countersign of friendship. It brings rest to the weary, cheer to the discouraged, sunshine to the sad, and it is nature's best antidote for trouble. Yet, it cannot be bought, begged, borrowed, or stolen, for it something that is of no value until it is freely given away. Some people are too tired to give a smile. Give them one of yours, as none needs a smile so much as he who has no more to give. (Author Unknown)