

How Isolated Family Caregivers Can Connect

They should ask friends and family for support

by Barry J. Jacobs, December 3, 2019



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"I used to reach out to our siblings and so-called friends, but then I figured what's the point?" said Jim, a 67-year-old man who's been caring for his wife with multiple sclerosis for 35 years. "No one really understands what we go through and I'm not sure they care. So I just focus on her and me now."

At this initial psychotherapy appointment, I'm tempted to press Jim on the importance of drawing on others' support to feel encouraged and uplifted through hard times. But I'm afraid he'll look at me as if I don't understand either. And maybe I don't. I have no idea how many years of rejection and neglect he faced before deciding to stop asking for help or even the occasional phone call and, as a self-protective measure, relied entirely on himself.

Research has long demonstrated that feeling positively connected to others leads to good health. One study found that it reduced the likelihood of early death by 50 percent. But social isolation or disconnection is seen as an increasing American health problem. A highly publicized Brigham Young University study in 2015 found that prolonged social isolation is as harmful as smoking 15 cigarettes a day — more harmful than obesity. And a 2019 University of Michigan-AARP poll of adults between the ages of 50 and 80 found 1 in 3 adults say they lack regular companionship, and 1 in 4 say they feel isolated from other people at least some of the time.

Hurt and angry family caregivers, such as Jim, are among them. In part, they are so consumed by the urgency of caregiving demands they de-prioritize seeking social support. But many also feel a sense of hopelessness and despondency about the prospect of connecting with the people who should be there for them. They bitterly perceive that family members and friends have turned their backs on them to blithely live their own lives. These caregivers then turn inward, hunkering down in their own homes, increasingly cut off from the rest of the world.

How do we help family caregivers cope with repeated rejection and still seek social connection? Here are some ideas:

Believe in the power of social replenishment

The same caregivers who, for their loved ones' sake, make sure they get flu shots and do daily push-ups to remain physically healthy don't bother to pick up the phone, go online or attend support groups to maintain their emotional health. But social ties are like strong ropes that can hold them up, especially when their worries weigh on them and their spirits sink. Even the most confirmed introverts or dedicated misanthropes should put faith in the knowledge they are members of a greater community that can buoy the health of all.

Connect with the willing

It isn't worth it for caregivers to pursue family members or friends who are unwilling or unreachable. But that doesn't mean closing the door on all humankind. If family fails them, then there are neighbors and local community groups or church members. If the local community fails them, then there are apps, Facebook groups, and in-person, online or telephonic support groups with people dealing with similar challenges who will listen, understand and give pertinent advice. Even for the busiest and most harried family caregiver, there's no reason to be completely isolated unless he's determined to be alone in his struggles with the care receiver.

Give help to get help

A cynical view of people might posit that most are so wrapped up in themselves that they have a hard time empathizing with others. Nevertheless, the late psychiatrist Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy believed that almost all of us have an innate sense of reciprocity and fairness — that is, if others give to us, then we will give to them. It may sound counterintuitive but family caregivers can use this insight to increase their social supports. Rather than reaching out for social nurturance, they should first offer it readily to others. For example, Jim can call his siblings to see how they're doing and what they need. They may surprise him by ultimately responding in kind.

Don't give up seeking assistance and companionship

But even if others don't reciprocate as they should after a caregiver has made a helping gesture, it is still senseless for him to lick his wounds in bitterness and withdraw from all relationships. Social connectedness is too essential an ingredient of well-being. Caregivers need to move on, regretfully accepting the blinkered outlooks and limited compassion of family and friends, but not quit trying. Be calculating and pragmatic. Take your vitamins, get your sunshine, and find your people.