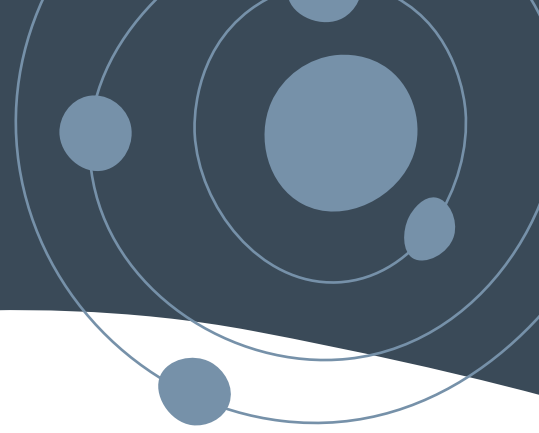


# 11 Opportunities in Caregiving



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## **1. Re-arranging and structuring your support network to meet your needs.**

This will be a completely different network than the one you setup or sustain for the person in your care or with your partner. Even if you are coupled, your needs are not carbon copies or even symmetrical. They are distinct and evolving and often require different spheres and levels of support. When revisited regularly and approached intentionally (even diagramming to really see them vividly), you can begin to identify what may need to improve or adapt to your changing circumstances over time.

*Are you satisfied with the level of support you have at this time? Are there areas of companionship, understanding, or even special interests where you'd enjoy more connection?*

## **2. Letting go of old (self-limiting) stories and ideas to welcome new ways of living.**

Caregiving holds a magnifying glass to just about every area of life, especially our relationships, primarily how we relate to ourselves. By the time a caregiver arrives in a support or wellness training program, they are often quite exhausted, hard on themselves and not only evaluating their present circumstances, but often their entire life. The stories we tell become the stories we live by and caregiving gives us the opportunity to make positive changes. While some changes are unwelcome and hard, there are upsides. Change in dementia care is hard, but when you pair this with midlife wisdom, you get to decide who you are and what you really want. It's an opportunity to allow yourself to change and evolve. This will inevitably include letting some things go to allow new experiences, people and ways of living into your world.

*If you could wave a wand and transform any belief or long-lived (outdated) story you have about yourself, what would this be?*

*How do you imagine this story or belief impacts your relationships? Or your ability to enjoy life?*

## **3. Tracking pleasant experiences more than unpleasant experience.**

With intense seasons of change and challenge, maximizing the little joys and pleasures throughout the day becomes a way to sustain perspective and protect sanity. The opportunity is how maximizing the small, pleasant experiences begins to rewire the brain and interactions over time. Simple as reorienting our attention, it's not always easy, though this practice can rather quickly nudge our entire way of seeing our world. Just as we do on vacation or somewhere we deem more "interesting," the same attention and appreciation brought to our daily life and routines can go a long way toward our lives and the positive and pleasantness in our midst. This can transform even the most repetitive or monotonous task to

soften our stress load.

*When is the last time you tracked the pleasant events of your day with a note-to-self? We don't often need to track or remember the challenging parts. Isn't that interesting? Are you willing to track pleasant events today?*

#### **4. Permission and ironclad reasons to simply say, No.**

It's Okay to leverage caregiving to work for you, especially when you outgrow certain roles, interests, relationships and ideas about how your life should look. To kindly and firmly do what is best for you, is not selfish. This means doing what it takes to be able to show up for the people you love in ways which enhance connections and minimize your stress. This will require you to say No more often than you may be accustomed, and this is a gift. It gets more comfortable with experience and more necessary over time.

*Where do you sense you'd begin? Is there somewhere in your life, a small commitment or part of your routine that doesn't resonate or fit the way it used to?*

#### **5. Expediting and implementing your own, distinct, rest-of-life care plan.**

It's unfortunate how we sometimes must hit a wall to stop and care for ourselves. This is why making decisions about care is often fraught with tension between family members when a plan is not in place or when Plan A needs to shift quickly to Plan B. While we cannot prepare for and anticipate all outcomes, we can communicate our needs and take action on our behalf (alongside our partner's plan) prior to a significant change with the understanding that while a crisis may be averted (even possible when all plans are solid), we may encounter the unanticipated. When you are clear on your values and needs, your contingency plans will unite your team and you will be able to navigate a crisis with more clarity. The confidence you need to feel more equipped to answer calls of support can be met with concrete directions – "how can I help?" and "what do we do?" will be in the direction of your actual needs. And, if something should happen to you, your wishes and plans will be set in motion without additional chaos.

*What elements of your care feel most vulnerable at this time? How do you sense these impact the care of your family member or partner or yourself? Where would you begin to update or improve your personal care plan and wishes?*

#### **6. Prioritizing your own wellbeing and self-care.**

The peace of mind available in knowing you have plans in place for your own vision of your care is empowering and relieves anticipatory stress. The practice of prioritizing your self-care is transformative and can relieve everyday stress. Learning more about how your own body and mind work and how your history informs your future is key to maintaining this as a practice. Continually learning how to best care for yourself within the context of your present circumstances, among the emerging and evolving roles and responsibilities of care partnering, will fine tune what you envision for yourself. And perhaps most confronting yet critical, what happens if you are no longer able to be a care partner? It's unpleasant to think about for certain, however, it does not help to avoid what's uncomfortable in the short run at the risk of your long-term stability. Even small, meaningful investments in your daily care will transform your wellbeing and the wellbeing of the people in your care in the long run.

*Where do you see a need to reinforce the time and space you need to care for yourself?*

*When you consider your own care over the next year, where would you like to focus?*

*When you consider your care over the next several years, what do you identify as the biggest obstacle to securing and maintaining your wellbeing?*

## **7. Relating to your grief differently, proactively and creatively.**

Becoming curious about the presence of grief in your life and how your grieving style may impact your wellbeing, interactions, decisions, behaviors and choices tends to lead toward a more intentional, kinder and lighter approach to change and loss. Lighter, in this way, means how grief is held with greater depth of understanding; what may be lurking in the recesses of your mind and body is brought to the forefront, skillfully. Grieving often begins at diagnosis and, in hindsight, even years prior. The opportunity to develop practices to work with grieving, building a relationship with your own experience of grief, helps to minimize its more destructive forms (anger, resentment, avoidance...) and maximize connection and growth.

*When you consider your relationship with loss and grief over your lifespan, how has it changed? matured? compounded or transformed with time?*

*How does your experience of grief show up, as it is expressed intentionally or unintentionally, in your life and in caregiving?*

## **8. Getting rid of things while honoring their history and making room for space.**

Simplifying your living environment to minimize confusion in a partner with dementia has many advantages for your own peace of mind as well. When we are blessed with decades of living, we tend to accumulate more things. Deciding what is meaningful to you and releasing the rest is a helpful process, best done slowly and intentionally over the course of a season, year or even longer. Unfortunately, many people hold on to more than is needed and struggle with attachment, naturally, to the history of things vs. the support or joy they presently provide.

*What objects or household items do you hold onto that feel central to your identity?*

*What objects do you keep which now generate more tension than peace that you've held on to for years? Something you'd like to release this season?*

## **9. Investing in your needs as they are linked to patience for life's many inconveniences.**

When there is a moderate crisis, many caregivers share how truly competent and calm they feel. It's the little irritations which seem to generate more impatience and irritability, resentment, and frustration. When we feel thrown by a small thing, or when we are apt to react disproportionately to a mistake, some unplanned change or even predictable, everyday challenge, there is often an unmet need lurking in the background. When our needs are not met, we are out of balance with the rhythm of our life and our relationships. This is an opportunity to investigate and notice a flag for more care, and with more curiosity, not more self-criticism.

*Is there a pattern of reactivity in your daily life which brings you or others some distress?*

*Where would you like to cultivate more patience in the face of impatience? What do you sense this is about?*

## 10. Learning to be Okay when others are not.

Many people, especially women, are socialized to prioritize the needs and happiness of others above their own. This is quite different from wholeheartedly advocating for the needs and happiness of others and supporting their happiness. The former is at the expense or absence of one's own needs and happiness. Caregiving is fraught with this tension and it's often in midlife, and through many hardships and even health issues, when we may recognize the imbalance and how unsustainable this approach really is. Harvesting and drawing on the wisdom we've reaped with intention and developing practices for tapping into our direct experience can help us to meet and override these old patterns when they creep in to rob us of our health and joy. The tide of family expectations, old stories and habits, like people-pleasing and making sure everyone is OK so you can be OK, is one place to begin.

*What are the some of the 'coulds, woulds & shoulds' which arise automatically when you feel this tension in your own life? Or when guilt arises in the midst of your joy?*

## 11. Designing and maintaining a personal Wisdom Council.

While this can be related to #1, it's quite different than the on-the-ground support in how you can also call on those who are removed from your daily life yet invested in the care of your heart and soul. You may also call on those who are no longer living. I have yet to meet a caregiver who does not have some connecting practice or way of relating to the world and their place in it through some contemplative lens. While this may be through nature, a specific religious or spiritual practice, definitions and descriptions are not as important as what this means to each person. This is a private, personal and transformative way of relating to life's brutal and beautiful realities (brutiful). While this may include communing with nature or art, designing specific calming rituals or turning toward religious practices of your preference, many caregivers call on the reflections and the guidance of their beloved mentors, family members and friends. This may include those who are no longer living. Additionally, caregivers often share how they reflect on the ways a living partner or parent with dementia may have encouraged or affirmed a difficult decision prior to where they are in their symptoms. I have come to call this The Wisdom Council and you are free to populate your private council however you wish.

*There are people we have known and loved so well, we can hear their voices and imagine conjuring how they would advise us, how they might even see some aspect of something we are struggling to see or work through. Whether through journaling, casually in your mind throughout the day, on a walk in nature, or in deep meditation, consider who you would invite to be with you on your Wisdom Council.*

*What would you ask today?*

