



Caregiver Corner: Sometimes, you just need to get away

Despite taking little mini-vacations like we talked about in our last issue, there will come a time when you really need to get away. It could be for an afternoon or evening, or it could be for a weekend or a week. Removing yourself entirely from the caregiving environment will not only give you a refreshing new lease on life and the caregiving task, it can also be a nice break for the person for whom you are caring. And knowing that you are getting a break can help that person to feel less of a burden. This sort of extended break will take a bit of planning. And it will take the help of family members and friends.

First, discuss it with your loved one

The first thing to do, of course, is discuss your plan with the person for whom you are caring. This is especially important if you are planning a weekend or weeklong getaway. Ask the person how he or she feels about your taking a break. It is likely the person will be delighted you are taking care of yourself, but if you do encounter some resistance, you might tell him or her that you feel you need a break in order to be a better caregiver when you return and that you are confident it will be good for both of you.

The person for whom you are caring is also the first person to ask for suggestions about who might be good to come in and help in your place. This might be a good time for a friend of the person to come in for a “reunion” – something that might help buoy the spirits of the person with cancer and give him or her a needed break, too.

How to reach out for help

Don't be afraid to ask for help. Sometimes, family members may be very willing to help, but if they see you doing everything and you make it seem effortless, they may think you don't need or want the help. Friends, too, are very likely willing to help, but don't know what to offer. That's why the ball is in your court.

The first thing to consider when determining who is best to step in and help is how long you intend to be gone. Perhaps you just need an afternoon off once a week or once every couple of weeks and simply need a friend or family member to “be there” in case your loved one needs something. Or perhaps you are planning a long weekend or full week's getaway, in which case you will want someone or several people who will be able to handle a large variety of tasks.

If you are looking for short term help –

You will likely find many people willing to jump in and assist. Before speaking to people, think through specifically what you will need them to do, what things they will need to know in case of an emergency, and how long you will need them. Then write these down before speaking to someone. That way, you can ask for specific tasks and times rather than being vague and open-ended. That will make it much easier for a person to say, “Yes, I can do that.”

When speaking to the person you would like to have help you for only a short period of time, be candid about your needs, reiterate the specific tasks and times, and let the person know why you have chosen to ask him or her. When asking for short time help, you may wish to say something like this:

"Kathy, I am finding that I really need a break from time to time from my caregiving – just to get a few personal things done and to relax a bit. I was wondering if you might be able to help once a week or just once every two weeks from 1 to 5 in the afternoons. Whichever day is best for you will work for me. You know, Jackie has always liked and enjoyed you and I think it would be good for her, too, to have a break from me. I would need for you to give her medicine at 3PM, but other than that, all you will need to do is spend a little time with her, talking or watching TV – unless, of course, she would like to sleep. I will, of course, leave my cell number and other emergency numbers. Is that something you think you could do?"

If the person accepts and also volunteers to do a task or chore such as a load of laundry, or washing dishes while helping, consider the offer seriously. Sometimes, caregivers think they must do all the chores themselves, but there are usually some that you can let go of. And if you can let go, do.

If you are looking for long term help –

You will obviously have a different set of issues than you do with short term. Not only will you have your loved one and his or her care and safety to consider, but also the operation of your household. And you'll have to consider the substitute caregivers' availability. You may need to determine the dates of your getaway based on that. This whole effort will take a little more detailed planning. Making lists will help.

Start by creating a list of the usual chores and tasks that you do during a normal week. Think of everything you possibly can that you normally do. Then examine them closely and determine which of the tasks can wait until your return and which ones must be done while you are gone. Cross off the ones that can wait so that you are dealing only with those that must be accomplished. For example, if you normally do four loads of laundry each week, determine how many loads actually need to be done for your loved one only. Once you have pared down your list to only the necessary tasks, sort those tasks by day and by time of day, especially those required for the care of your loved one. But don't forget household tasks like bringing in the mail and the newspaper each day, and turning down the heat at night.

Doing this sort of list making will help you "see" what needs to be done. Live with it for a while because you may wish to make edits. Once you have finalized it, you're ready to ask for help.

When speaking to the friend or family member you would like to have help you for a longer period of time, again be candid about your needs and let the person know why you have chosen to ask him or her. Also present the person with your "to do" list. This will show how much time and thought you've put into the caregiving tasks and will make him or her feel more confident about being able to fill your role. When asking for long-term help – say from your brother and his wife -- you may wish to say something like this:

"Bill, I really think that I need to take an extended break from taking care of Jackie. I'm afraid I'm in danger of beginning to snap at her and I certainly don't want to do that. I think she needs a break from me, too. I know she would love to spend more time with you and Julia. Would it be possible for the two of you to move in for a week to care for her? I'd like to take a full 7 days starting July 14, but I can change that depending upon your availability. I've drafted a complete care plan and schedule of household tasks to make it as easy for you as possible. And I've even written out directions for the remote! Would you discuss it with Julia and let me know if you can help?"

Once the person responds in the affirmative, plan on a meeting with him or her, you, and the person for whom you are caring. That way, everyone will be on the same page and your loved one will feel like he or she is part of everything and will have a say, if he or she wishes.

Now it's time to turn your thoughts to your getaway – what you're going to do, where you're going to go, and possibly, what you'll need to pack!

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