

Encircling Care— Support for Caregivers

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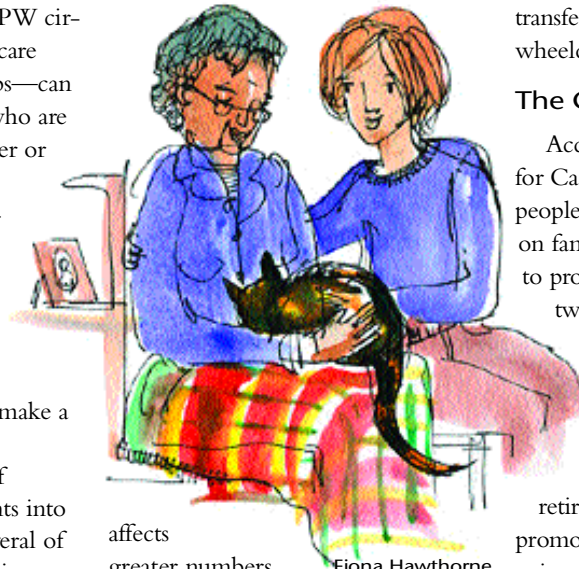
BY PAT GLEICH

health connections

Congregations—through PW circles, specially organized care teams, deacons or other groups—can provide assistance to people who are giving care to a family member or friend. Thoughtful and intentional support can help alleviate the impact that the responsibility, intensity and isolation of caregiving can have on even the most hearty and devoted caregiver.

Recently I was invited to make a presentation on Presbyterian caregiving to a small group of Presbyterian Women. Moments into the presentation I noticed several of the women smiling and glancing obliquely at one another. I asked one of the women what I had said to evoke their response. “Oh, we’re not smiling at your remarks,” she replied. “You must have heard us talking at breakfast this morning. Of the seven of us, three are currently giving care.”

National statistics suggest that perhaps as many as one in three people is involved in caregiving—either on a daily basis or sporadically. Although many people live independently throughout their whole life, many others do not and require assistance—caregiving. So each day, caregiving



Fiona Hawthorne

affects greater numbers of individuals and families.

Caregiving activities include bathing, dressing, feeding or supervising the activities of another, providing transportation, running errands, shopping, managing financial affairs and a multitude of other time-intensive activities. The Administration on Aging found that of the people who received care in their homes in 2002, an estimated 19 to 22 percent required special care. This care involved 24-hour supervision, specialized communication, management of odd or difficult behaviors, dealing with incontinence,

transferring from bed to a chair or wheelchair and other personal care.

The Caregivers

According to the National Alliance for Caregiving, more than half of people with care needs rely exclusively on family and friends to provide assistance. An estimated two-thirds of caregivers are women, so several studies have examined the impact of caregiving on women.

Working fewer hours, quitting work, taking early retirement and passing up promotions, training or special assignments are only a few of the trends noted in caregivers who were women working outside the home.

While many of the people giving care are present 24 hours per day, seven days per week, nearly seven million people provide care long distance. The National Council on the Aging (NCOA) found that the average travel time for these long-distance caregivers to reach their relatives is four hours.

The Impact of Caregiving

Caregiving has many benefits for both giver and receiver. The receiver of care can stay at home and regularly

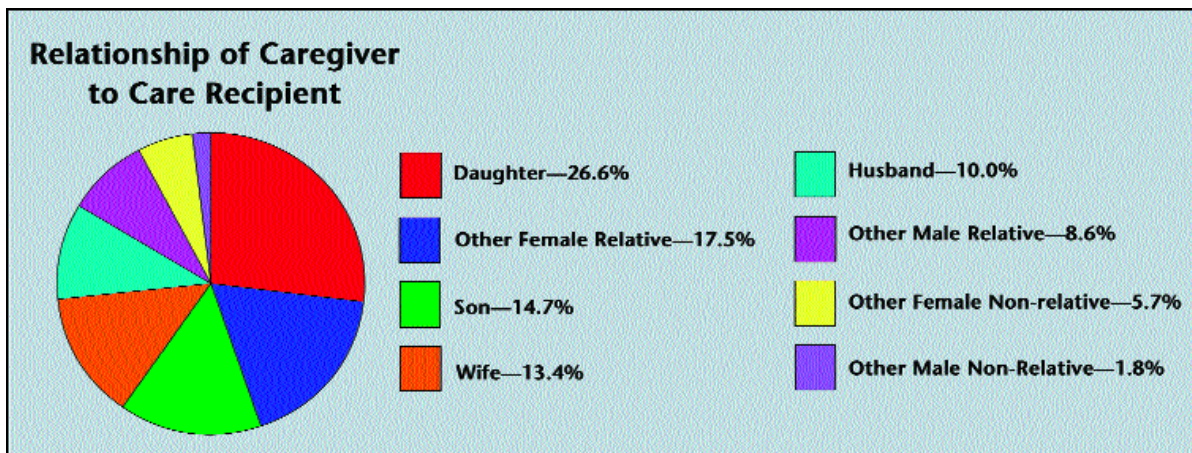


Caring Kits

Suggested items that could be included in the kit:

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| Caregiver's journal | Bath salts and fragrance | Reading material |
| Assorted herbal teas | Postage stamps | A CD of relaxing music |
| Tea tree oil for massage | Phone card | Hand lotion |
| Soft, thick socks | Pens and attractive writing paper | Disposable cameras |
| Handmade soaps | | Picture frames |

If you know the person giving care, add any other individual items you know might have special meaning.



see family, the giver is able to spend more time with his or her loved one, and both receive many spiritual and emotional gifts. Despite the rewards, caregiving is a difficult task. Caregivers spend an average of 20 hours per week providing assistance. Even more time is required when the person receiving care has difficult issues, such as dementia, decreased mobility or a special feeding or breathing apparatus. Caring for a person with disabilities can be physically demanding, especially for older caregivers. For example, a recent article in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* reported that despite the tolls of caregiving, women caregivers are less likely than male caregivers or non-caregivers to have their own health needs met. A study of caregivers released by The Commonwealth Fund, a private organization that supports research on health and social issues, found that of those giving care 54 percent had one or more chronic health conditions and 51 percent exhibited depressive symptoms.

While each caregiving situation is different, caregivers are likely to experience enormous stress as well as feelings of isolation, depression or anxiety. A caregiver who is caring for someone who has had a prolonged incapacitating illness may begin

grieving the loss of the person's "former self"—as a spouse/partner, parent, sibling, friend—before the physical loss of the person. Some caregivers worry that they will not outlive the person for whom they are caring, not knowing who will care for the person if that happens.

Congregations Can Help

Caregivers must find practical ways to cope and to maintain their own health. Many feel selfish or guilty as they take a bit of time to consider what they need to continue functioning in a long-term or even short-term, yet intense caregiving situation. Congregations can respond to their needs by reminding them that they, too, are important. Congregational visiting teams who focus attention on the caregiver and provide opportunity for the caregiver to express his/her feelings are extremely important.

Another very tangible way to deliver the message is through a Caring Kit. Caring Kits are preassembled kits containing items a caregiver might want, need or appreciate. They communicate many things, but, most important, they let the caregiver know that she/he is remembered, cared about and has permission to take a bit of time for herself/himself.

Often caregivers do not have many opportunities to "pamper" themselves. If your congregation is small, you are likely to know who the caregivers are. If the congregation is large, people involved in health ministry, parish nursing, congregational care teams or pastors may be able to tell you who needs a Caring Kit. They may even incorporate delivery of the kits into their ministry.

Depending upon your choices, the container for the Caring Kit can vary from a woven basket to an attractive old-fashioned hatbox—tailor it to the tastes of the caregiver. Your group might want to develop a series of kits in order to bring something fresh and new periodically to a caregiver in a long-term caregiving situation. It is important that people who are involved in long-term caregiving activities not be forgotten over time.

It is also important to remember that while the Caring Kit is very important, the caring message delivered by and through the kit is equally important. Include a note if you know the caregiver well or create a standard note from your circle.

Pat Gleich is associate for Health Ministries U.S.A.

Additional suggestions for congregations can be found on the Health Ministries Web pages at www.pcusa.org/health/usa.