

How to Really Help a Caregiver

Your good friend seems different lately. You know that her husband's health has been failing and she has been taking him to more doctors' appointments. But she hasn't been returning your calls. You've offered to help but she hasn't accepted it. You begin to wonder if maybe she doesn't want your help. Or your calls.

Trust me, she does.

Caregivers have so much on their plates when caring for a loved one. They are under a great deal of stress and often don't reach out or accept help that is offered. It's often really hard for someone to ask for help. Or to tell you what they need when you say "let me know what I can do to help". Caregivers don't want to be a burden to anyone and it's hard to sort through the 'to do' list and delegate.

They may want to, or feel they need to, provide all the care themselves. But there are things you can do. Here are some tips to really help a caregiver:

- Let her know you don't know what it's like to be in her situation but that will help in any way you can. Try to imagine what it would be like to be in her shoes. What would be helpful for you?
- When you offer to help, she may not know what to ask for help with. Be prepared to offer specific ideas. Some ideas include; offer to walk her dog, take the kids to the park in the evening, pick up a few groceries or sit with her husband so she can run some errands.
- She likely has a long "to do" list and each day it gets longer and may seem insurmountable. Offer to contact friends to let them know what is going on in her world. She's focusing all her energy on her loved one and doesn't have any more left at the end of the day to make those calls. Those friends will likely want to help if they know what's going on.
- Allow her to vent. Listen to what she needs to say. She does not expect you to have the answers. She just needs someone to hear her. You may not know what it is like to be a full time caregiver, but if it was you, you would want someone to talk to about the tough times.
- When calling, realize she may not be able to chat as long as she used to. But she appreciates hearing your voice and knowing you are thinking of her. Or send her texts or emails – simple notes saying "I'm thinking of you". Those really do mean a lot.
- Don't be offended if she doesn't return calls quickly or declines offers for get-togethers. She isn't trying to be standoffish. She truly is exhausted and may not have the energy to give to anyone else at this time. But she needs to know her friends are there and supportive.
- Make a point to call before you visit and offer to pick up items from the store or pharmacy.
- If you do drop by, don't expect to stay as she may be in the middle of something. Share something that will lift her spirits - like cut flowers from your yard, a plate of cookies or something as simple as a hug.

- Set up a 'standing appointment' if possible with her. For example, offer to come over every Saturday morning for 2 hours so that she can do whatever she would like. She will have something to look forward to each week – the promise of time to herself.
- Bring in a hot meal and clean up afterwards. She is making sure her loved one eats well but may not be eating a balanced meal herself.

She may not have needed help when you offered a week ago. Or she thought the illness wouldn't last long and she could manage everything. But maybe her loved one is not getting better. Or she is beginning to realize that she can't do it all alone. Continue to offer and show that you care. Caregivers often forget to take care of themselves. They put their own health and well-being on the back burner. They expend so much energy on taking care of their loved one that they have little energy left for anything else. Knowing that you care means the world.

You may be surprised how much a kind, reassuring word can mean to a caregiver. They are dealing with stress, anger, pain and often daily changes which are frightening. Acknowledge that she is doing a good job. Words of encouragement can be just the fuel she needs to keep going.

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