

Seven Blessings for Caregivers

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1. Go with the flow.

Realize that you are now on the schedule of the person you are caring for, not yours. Adapt to their meal times, their waking times, as best you can. My aunt was awake from midnight to 4 a.m. My uncle woke at midnight and spent this time with her. Others will be awake late and sleep through the morning, or vice versa. Sleep around this time as best you can. Remind yourself that it won't last forever.

2. Talk with the person.

Along with caring for the person's physical needs, it's essential to connect to their emotional needs. Comfort and companionship help them as well as you. "My doctor told me that when she was awake, that I should sit down and talk with [my wife] and that would be better than any medicine," Says my uncle. Read to them. Look at picture books. It's always good to remember things in the past, things that are good memories, such as places the person has been. Help them write letters if they wish. Invite others in to visit too.

3. Provide compassionate touch.

Many seriously ill or dying individuals are non-verbal. Or, they go from verbal to non-verbal. You can still connect through touch.

"I wanted to cry because I didn't want her to die," says my uncle. "I felt I was really between a rock and a hard place. The doctor told me to start off by holding her hand. I did that and it made it a lot easier for both of us. That first night I held her hand and gently rubbed her ears. She loved that." For many, bathing, and placing pillows in different positions, relieve pain and bring comfort to the one being cared for.

Being involved verbally and physically with the dying person is a medicine for both of you. My uncle described it as "the mental exercise of involvement when you really don't know what to say." I would describe this as the power of compassionate presence.

4. Rely on hospice.

Hospice can't do it all. But they are there as a backup and on call 24/7. Tell them when you need something or someone or have any doubts or questions. Don't be reluctant to complain when they send someone who seems clumsy or uncaring. (This doesn't happen often, but has been known to occur.)

Hospice also provides respite care when you are burned out or need to get fresh air or do errands. They can provide volunteers to be with someone while you go out for a few hours. If you are really worn out, they can take the patient into an inpatient unit and provide respite care for a limited amount of time.

Nurses, especially, are wonderful sources of support and instruction. If you are feeling overwhelmed, tell them. If you need to know how to administer a medicine, ask for instructions. Hospice nurses have lots of experience with such situations and will give you their perspective. If you need medicines adjusted, they can get that approved from a hospice doctor.

5. Rely on the power of prayer.

Praying with the dying person can be of great comfort to them. Do it even if you do not go to church or pray yourself or even if you have no religion. You are doing what has meaning to the person you are caring for. It's not about you. If the person you are caring for is not religious, don't force prayer on them. Talk about positive things they love. Keeping their spirits up is a spiritual practice in itself.

6. Take care of yourself.

Pace yourself. Do whatever you need to do to take a break or get outside and rejuvenate. Caregiving is exhausting. Even if you aren't doing a lot, just being in the presence of the dying is heavy, literally and physically.

"I took my wife's advice," says my uncle. "She could tell I was getting tired. She made sure I was getting enough sleep. I was on my roller skates; I would run myself into the ground, being tired, and she would tell me to go to bed. I would split my schedule. I would get eight hours but sleep four hours at a time, twice a day."

Try, if at all possible, to get others to relieve you of some of the caregiver burden. Come up with a schedule and see who will step up to sit with the dying person some of the time.

7. Welcome the experience.

Much of caregiving is beautiful, unforgettable experience. Don't resist it; try not to stumble into it unwillingly, as a burden. Welcoming what comes will bring you much love and blessings as well as tasks and worries and sadness. It's a package deal. Be open to it all.

How to be open?

- Start the day with calm and quiet and a positive intention. Meditate. Calm your mind
- Clear out negativity
- Reduce distractions (TV, etc)

Be open to the exchange that goes with the caregiving experience. You cook, you clean, you wash the person, you coordinate appointments. But you meet wonderful people; you get stories and love and gratitude from the one you care for; you learn how much you can do; you stretch your patience, your strength and discover just what you can do.

When you do something for someone, realize that there is an exchange. It's a give and take practice. You take on someone's suffering, you let it go and give it to the universe; you give back love and caring; you get gratitude and blessings from the person, the family, the universe.