

Caring for Caregivers

10 practical ideas for making a difference in the often-overwhelming life of a caregiver.

Your best friend is wearing herself out taking care of her mother after hip surgery. Your neighbor rarely leaves the house because her husband has Alzheimer's disease. Your co-worker is using up all of her vacation days to tend to a brother recovering from a stroke. Regardless of the scenario, you probably know someone in a caregiving role. The National Alliance for Caregiving reports that more than 34 million Americans provide unpaid care to an adult age 50 or over annually, and the demand for family caregivers is expected to continue for the next several decades as the Baby Boom generation ages.

As rewarding as caregiving can be, it can also be stressful, especially for people who are simultaneously trying to juggle jobs, parenting and other demands. That's where friends and family like you can step in. Here are 10 actionable ways that you can bring truly helpful assistance to the caregivers in your life.

1. Don't just drop off a casserole.

Default gestures like making a home-cooked meal or sending a bouquet of flowers may seem perfectly nice, but when it comes to providing help to a caregiver, one size does not fit all. Whenever possible, figure out *specific* ways to help someone's unique caregiving situation. Try asking your friend what he or she needs help with. Oftentimes you'll get a response along the lines of "Oh, I'm fine, but thanks for asking." That's when you may need to try a more direct approach. If you're willing and able to be flexible, try saying, "You've got a ton on your plate — I don't know how you're doing it all! I've blocked out Friday morning to help you. What can I do that's most helpful for you? You name it, I'll take care of it."

2. Give the gift of time.

Busy caregivers often neglect taking care of themselves, including finding small pockets of time to rest and recover. See if you can spend an afternoon with the care recipient so that your friend or co-worker can head to the gym, nail salon, library or a movie for some emotional replenishment.



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3. Provide appropriate food.

Some caregivers appreciate help with food, but that food may need to fall within certain dietary restrictions for their loved one's medical condition (diabetes, for example). So, before you drop off groceries or prepare meals, check in with the caregiver and see what guidelines are in place.

4. Send a handwritten note.

Thoughtful and encouraging words can brighten anyone's day, but especially someone who spends so much time caring for another. Put pen to paper and affirm the wonderful qualities you see in your caregiver friend. Remind them what an important job they're doing.

5. Help with household chores.

Do the laundry, walk the dog, put up some holiday decorations, clean out the fridge... Just offer to roll up your sleeves and get to work.

6. Lend a hand.

Tap into your own personal or professional expertise. Are you an accountant? Offer to help with taxes or other financial paperwork. Do you have a knack for being organized? Offer to create a medical binder or a color-coded calendar for appointments and special events.

7. Contribute items.

If you're in a position to purchase things for the caregiver, take stock of what will be helpful for his or her specific situation. For example, a voice-enabled device that can play soothing music, give national news updates, set alarms and do limitless other functions could be a great addition to the home where your friend is providing care. Or maybe some safety equipment (a bed rail, for instance) could bring much-needed peace of mind. Just be sure to get the caregiver's buy-in before you make the purchase. It's important to contribute only items that the caregiver truly wants and will use.

8. Organize other helpers.

Responding to the sheer volume of people offering to help can become a chore in and of itself for caregivers. If you know a caregiver who is fortunate enough to be receiving lots of inquiries from friends and family, volunteer to be the "chief communicator" by setting up an online sign-up sheet, returning phone calls, or doing whatever you can to run interference so that the caregiver can focus on tasks at hand.

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9. Recruit a team.

In contrast, some caregivers (for lots of different reasons) experience a lack of people offering to help. If you can see that a caregiver is stretched thin, but few people are stepping forward, try recruiting a few helpers. Many times, people are eager to lend a hand — they just need to be asked. With the caregiver’s permission, you could send out a no-pressure email that says something like, “Janet has been spending a lot of time taking care of her dad recently, but she has a hard time asking for help. I’m putting together a list of errands that could ease her burden. If you’re able to take on a quick task in the next few weeks, please let me know and I’ll send you the details. Thank you!”

10. Listen.

The most helpful thing you can do for caregivers might simply be to listen to their fears and frustrations. Make yourself available. Listen attentively. Only give advice when asked. Encourage sharing with gentle prompts such as, “Tell me about the latest highs and lows,” or “What does a typical day look like for you these days?” Be as empathetic as possible. Put yourself in the other person’s place and try to feel what it’s like to be them at that moment.

Offering to pitch in for a caregiver in your life in specific ways can help them feel cared for, too. Even small ways of reducing their stress or helping to ease their burden can make a difference.

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