

Four Simple Resolutions

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Nurturing Relationships With Those You Care For

The start of a new year is a great time to take a moment to refresh and renew the special role you play as a caregiver. Start with our four simple resolutions that every caregiver can consider. In them we hope you'll find ideas and encouragement to help ensure that your caregiving relationship is an uplifting one for both of you.

1. Talk Openly and Honestly

There are certain situations in a caregiving relationship that can feel a little awkward. Incontinence can be one of them. Incontinence is a medical condition that can strain relationships, and affect a person's self-esteem and independence. So by all means, keep the communication flowing by openly and respectfully sharing feelings and concerns.

Lisa, a nurse from Bethesda, Md., found that talking with her 83-year-old mother about incontinence helped them both feel better about the issue. "When an accident occurred, I reassured Mom that it was okay and I was especially careful to never make her feel ashamed," Lisa says.

"Encouraging my mom to address her loss of independence in daily activities is so important," Lisa adds. "Assuring her that she is loved and important to us and that we are interested in helping her every way we can is vital."

Cathy Hodges, a nurse for Duke Healthcare Services in Durham, N.C., advises caregivers not to "talk down" to their loved ones, but rather discuss incontinence and other life issues in matter-of-fact terms that make them feel respected.

Once the subject of incontinence is broached, take the discussion a step further and talk about treatments and solutions. Assist your loved one by encouraging him or her to visit a healthcare professional, and work together to choose an absorbent product. (Visit www.Depend.com to learn more about products, available treatment options and other advice for caregivers.)

2. Work Together as Partners

Approaching caregiving with a team mindset can improve the experience for both of you. Instead of telling your loved one to do something, suggest that "we" do it together. Let her know that you're going to accomplish it as partners.

Letting your loved ones voice their concerns and make choices concerning their daily care is also important. According to the Family Caregiver Alliance, allowing patients to express their preferences on seemingly small things will help give them a sense of control. For example, get them involved in developing a bathing schedule, selecting their clothing and creating an exercise plan. And you, as the caregiver, will find the experience more satisfying if you know that your loved one's wishes are being met.

In addition, advises John Khajit, gerontologist and family consultant for Family Caregiver Alliance, always ask if your assistance is needed before helping. If they say no, respect that, but remain close by to ensure their safety.

3. Enjoy Time Together Outside of Caregiving

Spending some quality one-on-one time with your loved one outside of specific caregiving tasks can be a great way to enjoy your relationship, according to Khajit. "That acknowledges their self-worth," he says. He suggests sharing an activity you both enjoy, such as watching a favorite TV program, listening to music, putting together a puzzle, visiting the park or just having lunch together.

4. Remember That Caregivers Need Care, Too

As a caregiver you wear many hats to keep things running smoothly, which quite naturally results in less time for yourself. But caring for yourself is essential. Setting aside some quality time just for you is key to maintaining your physical and emotional health. Feeling good about yourself really does help you maintain good relationships with your loved ones.

"Caring for yourself is the single most important thing that you can do to improve your care for others," says Cathy Hodges. "Do not overlook your own healthcare needs. Maintain regular sleep patterns and follow healthy eating habits. Find time to relax." Stress-relieving activities — such as exercising, reading or talking with a friend — should be top priorities, she adds.

It's also important to ask for help in caring for your loved one. Lisa, for example, enlisted the help of her brothers to care for her mother. You might consider holding a family meeting to secure the help of relatives. This provides an opportunity for the people who love you to lend a helping hand.

John Khajit also suggests reflecting on the rewarding aspects of caregiving: "People feel they are fulfilling a vow," he says. "It's a way they express their love."