

Take Comfort

Reflections of Hope for Caregivers



By Denise M. Brown

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Reflections of Hope
for Family Caregivers

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To my life's toughest moments: Thank you
for the inspiration.

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~ **Spring** ~

No matter how long the winter, spring is
sure to follow.

~ Proverb

Warmth

After a cold winter, the warm sun
invigorates us, seeming to kiss our face,
giving our skin a warm glow. It feels great!

How do you warm your inside—your soul?
Who regularly kisses your soul?

Know that your soul needs to know such
warmth, too. Warm your soul with the good
friends and family members who honor who
you are, especially who you are in your
caregiving role.

Not sure who (or what) warms your soul?
You'll know when you feel your inner glow
shine.

Morning

On your tough days, the days that never seem to see sunlight, you may think that your problems will never be solved, your worries will never be resolved, your losses will never end. During those long days, where hopelessness seems to live, hold out until morning: Put yourself to bed and rest.

The new day often brings new perspectives, refreshed attitudes, and comforting words from friends.

You'll have dark days, but never take action about the reasons for the darkness until the light of morning.

Sacrifice

You haven't written them down, but if asked
you can rattle them off without hesitation:
Your sacrifices.

You've sacrificed your time, career goals,
retirement plans, financial security,
friendships, privacy, vacations. All in the
name of caregiving.

Ugh.

Remember what you haven't sacrificed:
Your self-respect, your dignity, your love of
your family, your commitment to doing
what's right, your desire to serve others in
need.

What you've held on to will become your
strong foundation on which you build your
life after caregiving—a life filled with
blessings you can only imagine.

Believe

What do you believe about yourself?

Doubts may tempt you to believe only the negatives. Banish the doubts and believe:

- Your best is always good enough;
- Your efforts will be rewarded;
- Your wisdom will guide you;
- Your strength will last;
- Your spirit will shine.

Believe in yourself—others will follow.

Happy

When so much seems to be so wrong, how can you be happy?

Happiness is a moment. The moment might be a smile you exchange with someone you love, an unexpected laugh you share with your caree, the satisfaction in completing a task well.

Look for moments throughout your day that make you smile, laugh, relax. When you have a few special moments like this in your day, you've known happiness. And, those moments today build into your tomorrows so that, during each day, you know happiness.

Luck

They say beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

The very same could be said about luck.

It's all in how you look at it.

Know that you are lucky to be blessed with your courage, wisdom and tenacity. And, know that these characteristics will keep you lucky.

Options

As you provide care, you face decisions, and then more decisions. Sometimes, in the decision-making process, you may feel you have two options that usually involve “either or” (i.e., either Mom lives here or she lives in the nursing home).

Remember that your options are as expansive as your imagination. “Either or” paints you in the corner. Avoid the corner by considering all your options—and all combinations of your options. Often, the best solution to a dilemma (and the best decision) encompasses a combination of your options.

Patience

Family caregivers often talk about their personal journey toward patience, to staying cool with a caree during hands-on care; to remaining calm when a caree asks the same question over and over; to holding back the angry words when a caree tries to complete a simple duty, but simply makes a mess.

Caregiving will test your patience like no other experience.

As you work toward increasing your patience, practice with yourself by being patient with your progress. Each day provides new opportunities to achieve patience so start each one a clean slate. You have the patience needed to provide care—allow yourself the time your patience needs to grow.

Umbrella

With spring's rainy weather comes the need for an umbrella—to protect and shelter from the storms.

Wouldn't it be great to have an umbrella to open for protection against life's storms? Consider the umbrellas you have in your life which shield, shelter and support:

--Members of your support groups might be the yellow umbrella you open when you need a hug to ward off the loneliness.

--Family, friends, health care providers may encompass the red umbrella you open when you need an army to provide care so you can outrun desperation.

--Your faith may be the purple umbrella you open for comfort when life's events challenge your belief system.

--Your journal may be the green umbrella you open when you want to protect yourself from the very dark clouds of caregiving—those overwhelming feelings.

--Your sense of humor may be the polka-dot umbrella you open when you need to enjoy a great laugh to ward off the tears.

When another storm rolls in, know that you have all the umbrellas (in vibrant, beautiful colors) you need to ride it out.

Honor

You do noble work, well-deserving of honor.

How can you honor yourself this week?

One way may be to create something that reflects your honor. For instance, you can plan now to grow a special part of your garden that honors who you are. Or, you can journal this week about what you honor. Or, you can draw, illustrate or paint all that's noble about you.

Honor what you do. Creating what you honor brings it all to life.

Love

You might find yourself longing for the time in your life when you felt love every day—from your spouse, your friends, your children. It seemed that you were surrounded by love.

Now, you might feel that you are just surrounded by pain.

You do know love. All that you do screams love. Because you act from love, you live love. The pain may make it hard to feel, but know that you are loved.

Very much.

Boundaries

We often protect our properties with bushes, foliage, a fence. The boundary marker may keep our pets safe, our garden free from hungry visitors and provide an aesthetically pleasing look to our property.

We need boundaries as much as our properties do.

How do you keep yourself safe and protected?

Boundaries keep you healthy. Set boundaries with family members, careers, co-workers, health care professionals, friends. Boundaries help you maintain healthy relationships and keep you on track with your goals. And, they protect who you are so your inner light always shines brightly.

Wish

You have wishes for your family and for your caree.

Sometimes, these wishes may bring guilt. For the sister who won't help, you wish... well, you wish she will someday feel your pain. For your caree who can't say "thanks", you wish... well, you wish for a day when someone else provides care so he/she can see just how good you are. For the caregiving experience, you wish... well, sometimes you wish it would just end. And, with that wish comes the greatest amount of guilt.

Next time you find yourself in such a wish about someone else, turn your wish around and make a wish for yourself. Wish yourself good fortune, good health and good love.

Then, write down these wishes, whatever they may be. Writing your wishes will help to make them your life.

Released

Sometimes, I wish for rain. Or, snow. Or, simply weather that will keep me inside. Sometimes, I wish for weather that releases me from my responsibilities—the errands, the running around, the stress to accomplish.

Sometimes, it's just great to have an excuse to be released so that I can simply be.

Today, consider yourself released. Released from second-guessing, from pressure to get it right, from stress of making things happen.

You are released.

You are released because you are always doing your very best. And, know that your best is just incredible.

Retreat

The disappointments can be hard to take—especially when it seems that the disappointments keep coming.

When the disappointments hit, the sadness hits, too. And, the sadness may last minutes, minutes that may turn into days that linger into nights.

When disappointments arrive, allow yourself the opportunity to retreat. Step back, lick your wounds, stay within your comfort zone. When you've healed, you're ready to head back out.

And, know that disappointments you've faced yesterday don't mean you'll face disappointments today. The future may hold more disappointments, but it also holds the blessings and treasures you deserve.

Retreat when needed; then heal; then head out knowing you can handle what comes.

Stew

Are you stewing?

Has an event or relationship or incident sent you into a stew?

You're in a stew if:

- You update your best friend about the situation (which never changes) every day;
- You fall asleep with thoughts of revenge;
- You wake up with different thoughts of revenge;
- You find your dog regularly covering her ears when you tell your story (to anyone who will listen).

Don't let the stew burn you! If you can make positive changes to affect the event, relationship, or incident, then take action. If not, move on, taking with you a lesson learned.

Stews are best left for the stove-top.

Step

To move forward into your future, you must release one foot, lift it from the ground.

Take it out of its past.

Your hurt and heartache may be keeping you in your past, cementing your foot so that you can't pick it up and take that one step forward. If you stay in the past, you'll never know what joy and blessings the future may hold.

Those who have caused you pain—family members, friends, colleagues, health care professionals, your career—may comprise the cement that holds you. Feel the pain they've caused, then release its hold so you can step forward.

Hanging on to the pain for too long keeps you from stepping in your future. And, you deserve the blessings that your future can bring.

Take It

Has someone done something really, really nice for you lately?

Was it hard to take?

When the good happens, take it. And, take it without questioning it. It's yours—you deserve it.

Confidence

So much of what you do is new to you. You now have duties and responsibilities that you had little time to practice but must perfect immediately.

How do you go from novice to pro?

Add confidence to your routine.

- ≡ Be confident that, if you don't have an answer, you will find one.
- ≡ Be confident that, if you are unsure of a hands-on technique, you'll find someone who can demonstrate.
- ≡ Be confident that your knowledge of your career's needs makes you an expert.
- ≡ Be confident that although you feel out-of-step, you are stepping in the right direction.

Your Higher Power has great confidence in you. Use that confidence to add confidence in all that you do and all that you say.

You can.
You will.
You do.

Myth

Do you have a myth that you buy into?

A myth may be: “No one will ever help (or understand).” Or, it may be: “There are no solutions to my problems.”

The truth is: You can find support and help. And, you can find solutions.

Support, help and solutions may not come overnight. But, they will come to you. Believe, investigate, try. You deserve all the good that will come from your efforts.

Win

You may feel like life is about losing: You watch your caree lose his or her abilities and independence, while you lose friends, free time, even your freedom.

Is it possible to enjoy a win?

Know that you win every day you fight the good fight. Your win is all about your efforts, your efforts to find the best care for your caree, the best support for you, the best options for your family.

Every day, you win. And no one is more deserving of wins than you.

Wonder

You may wonder:

What's the point?

The point is the wonder. Meaning, the mysteries of our lives (“Why me?” “Why now?”) often unleash the moments most full of wonder. Certainly, caregiving has been difficult, treacherous and heart-breaking. But, it's also shown you your priorities, your true friends, your unbelievable strengths.

That's the wonder: Isn't it wonderful to know this!

Find your wonder.

Budget

You may feel like your budgets rule your life: Budgets for care, budgets for the bills, budgets for the time you can spend away from caregiving. And, it always seems like the budget is about less, rather than more.

Consider the budget for yourself. How are you saving time and energy for yourself? How can you bank time and energy during the day to use for special times? How can your budget become a greater priority?

Your budget—and its care and keep—is as critical as the other budgets in your life. Budget wisely for yourself—it's well-deserved.

Visible

There's a saying: Pain is a part of life,
suffering is optional.

Caregiving is painful, sad, distressing. Do
you suffer in the caregiving role, so much so
that only your pain is visible? Does your
suffering define who you are?

You are a caregiver, but you also are giving,
gifted, intelligent and intuitive. When you
show your caregiving battle wounds, show
that they are scars now, in the process of
healing.

Truth

There's the truth that you wear on your face: I'm okay, you say to people who ask. We're doing okay, you tell people who inquire about you and your caree.

And, there's the truth that weighs on you heart: The truth you feel you need to hide from the world, from your caree, from other family members. The truth about your caree's condition, about your caregiving responsibilities, about your exhaustion, about your worries.

This week, give some air to the truth that weighs on your heart. Speak your truth to those who understand: Your support group, your best friend, your journal, your garden.

It's okay to let the truth in your heart out. It will lessen the weight of the truth you wear on your very loving, beautiful face.

Family

You may have heard these before:

Friends are God's way of apologizing for your family.

Friends are the family you choose.

Getting along with family, especially during the holiday season and particularly in a caregiving situation, may cause you to grit your teeth, clench your fists, swear under your breath. It's tempting to turn your back and walk away—for good.

Tempting, but perhaps not realistic. These relationships may be very important to your career. And, these relationships are the ones that tie you to your important personal history.

How do you deal with family?

You may not agree with them, you may not like them. So, you just love them through it. You smile. You tune them out. And, then you make time to spend with your family of friends.

Belong

You may feel that you don't quite belong—with some friends, with certain family members, in some social circles. You used to feel like you belonged; now, you just aren't quite sure where your place is. You and your life have changed so much. Where do all these changes put you?

Know that you belong, that the world has reserved a very special place for you. You belong because you have gifts, talents and wisdom that helps others. You belong because you understand the power of giving and how giving transcends everything else. You belong because you live a level of commitment that only a few can keep. You belong because you make the world a much better place.

The next time you feel unsure, know with all certainty: You belong. And, we're lucky to have you.

Oscar

You may feel like an actor every day, acting in a role.

For which performance would you win an Oscar?

How about the day when your caree had the flu and you thought you would lose your mind in the laundry? How about the day when your unavailable-to-help, out-of-town sibling came to visit—and your caree rolled out the red carpet? How about the day when your caree could not be satisfied, no matter what you did?

Put your performance up against Meryl Streep or Clint Eastwood and you'll win every time. Why? Because on those trying days you played your part: You remained calmed, smiled and did your best. Later, in private (alone, in your journal, in your support group), you let it out: The frustrations, the anger, the unfairness.

Acting sometimes is our survival tool. We can act on those bad days and, sometimes, acting that we are doing okay means that, really!, we are doing okay.

~ **Summer** ~

Then followed that beautiful season...
Summer....

Filled was the air with a dreamy and
magical light; and the landscape
Lay as if new created in all the freshness
of childhood.

~ Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Ray

Just like the sun, we all have our rays.

Your rays may be your support group, your spouse, your good friends, your garden, your books, your Bible, your journal. Any, and all, of these are your rays.

The center of your rays is your soul.

Your soul is your light. You illuminate.

Tall

Walk tall.

Here's why:

1. You stay, when most would run.
2. You persevere, when most would give up.
3. You believe, when most would doubt.
4. You try, when most would give in.
5. You forgive, when most would seek revenge.

Your courage, commitment and compassion are your greatest strengths; they keep you walking tall.

Shine

You may feel that you walk under a dark cloud, that storms block your sun.

No matter what the weather, know that you shine. Your light shines so strongly that no dark cloud can dampen it. Your light, truly, warms the world.

You shine, every day, in every way.

Cope

You may be asked: “How are you coping?”
A question that may stop you in your tracks:
“Coping? I’m not coping!” you may think.

Every day, you have coping skills—skills that you have developed—which help you through the day. You have learned to pick your battles; to stick to your priorities (letting the non-priorities go, knowing they’ll take care of themselves); to give tears and laughter their own space and time (sometimes sharing that space and time); to respect your limits; to set boundaries; to follow your gut; to support and be supportive. All these help you cope.

You have amazing resilience. Your coping skills that you have developed mean you will be okay. No; you will be better.

Positive

Pay attention to what you tell yourself.

For instance, you may say:

I'll never get this done.

I'll never find anyone who understands.

I'll never get what I want out of life.

Concentrate on turning the negatives into positives:

I have completed my tasks.

I have a great support system that honors and understands me.

I have what I want.

Getting what you want begins with believing you already have it. And, you deserve all the good that you want.

Power

On those tough days, when you may feel powerless, remember:

Putting your priorities in order allows you to focus on what's really important.

Owning your decisions gives you the flexibility to adjust and change them.

Worshipping what you believe (whatever that may be) keeps you in a good place.

Embracing your life's path gives you the confidence to take good risks.

Remembering that rewards arrive in all sizes means you appreciate all of them.

Powerless-ness is temporary. Your wisdom, strength and goodness are permanent. They are your power.

Build

As the saying goes, Rome wasn't built in a day.

And neither was a caregiving role.

You may feel pressure to find treatments, help, support, services, equipment—ASAP. Know that finding the right services, treatments, help and support is a process. And, often, it's a process involving trial and error.

Commit to taking a step each day toward finding the right solutions. Then, each day you'll build on those efforts.

Layer by layer, you'll build what you need in your caregiving role.

Caulk

Caulk?

Yep. Caulk.

As a family caregiver, you may find yourself trapped with the thought: I can do this on my own, alone, without any help. I can.

But, as with all good foundations, there will be cracks. And, that's where the caulk comes in handy.

You will have cracks in your caregiving experience. That's normal. You may find it difficult to bathe your father. Your impatience with your mother's repetitive questions may make spending seven days together a truly hairy experience—for both of you. You may find yourself becoming irritable and short-tempered with your spouse if you can't get to church services every week.

With the right caulk (a home health aide, an adult day center, breaks provided by family members or friends), these cracks are fixed. And, your foundation stays as strong as ever.

Today, how will you best use your caulk?

Simple

Life has thrown you complex and complicated experiences; it's natural to consider that complex and complicated answers are needed.

Keep it mind that simple often works best:

- ≡ Simple statements that explain your feelings and reflect your goals.
- ≡ Simple solutions that meet your career's needs and respect your boundaries.
- ≡ Simple steps that keep you on your path that leads to your goals.

When faced with stressful discussions and decisions, rely on simplicity; it has an amazing ability to cut through complications.

Accept

Does your day seem to revolve around one word? A simple, two-letter word that can hold such power over you:

No.

Your requests of your career often meet a (surprisingly strong) “No!”. (“I’ve never done that before and I’m not going to do that now!”)

Your appeals for help from family members may be greeted by “No”. (“I wish I could, but I’m just so busy!”)

Your phone calls to agencies for help are greeted by a polite “No.” (“We’re sorry but you don’t qualify for help.”)

It’s hard not get a complex.

In the throes of rejection, know that you have acceptance. You are accepted by those who truly love and honor you. Go toward that love when your day only seems to be about the rejection.

And, know that hearing a “No” only means one option has been eliminated. It means that you are closer to finding the solutions and answers that will work for you.

Gain

You face losses (and reminders of losses) every day: You've lost your freedom, flexibility, friendships, financial security, worry-free days.

Know that with each loss comes a gain. Maybe you've gained an insight about your inner strength, about your capabilities, your tenacity. Maybe you've gained a new friend, a new skill, a new zest for living a healthy life. And, maybe you've found a new relationship with your career—a different one, but one that reflects who you are and what you cherish.

This week, focus on your gains—you have many.

Child-Like

When you watch children play, you can't help but think: "Isn't it wonderful to be that excited about life?"

You have that same enthusiasm—although maybe not in the same doses—for an aspect of your life. Life's challenges, unfortunately, can stifle that enthusiasm.

Take some time to find the answer to this question: What interest, hobby or friend makes you want to jump up and down? Then, think how you can incorporate that interest, hobby or friend into your life on a regular basis.

Your child-like enthusiasm lives. Today, let it out.

Destiny

You may look around and think: “Is this my life? Cooped up in my house, surrounded by medical supplies, watching strangers parade in and out of the house?” Or, before your very eyes your life has become an intense juggling act; it’s not balls that you throw in the air, but two households, your spouse, your children, your job, your caregiving responsibilities.

It’s hard not to think: “Is this really my destiny in life? This? This is what I was meant to do?” You may feel betrayed by destiny.

But, your destiny is just taking form. Because of your caregiving experience, your destiny has the power to become greater than you could ever imagine.

Your turn will come. Your commitment, dedication and advocacy will create a destiny of opportunities. Your loving care will create a destiny of blessings.

Answers

Your role caregiving may open the box of unanswered questions. Where have my friends gone? When will family members finally come to visit? Why can I when no one else in the family can?

These questions can seem to prey on you—Why? Why? Why? There must be an answer!

Sometimes, the answers aren't worth seeking. Sometimes, if the focus falls too greatly on the unanswered questions, you may overlook the already answered questions. For instance, perhaps your sister won't help, but your new friend from the support group always makes you laugh and smile. Or, maybe the disability or chronic illness chased away your best friend, but the librarian makes sure you have the newest Books-on-Tape releases for your caree.

If your answers seem elusive, forgo those questions. Searching for what you can't find may diminish what you have.

And: Some questions aren't for us to answer.

Safe

One of your goals as a family caregiver is to keep your caree safe, so when your caree is at home, she is as safe as can be.

Where are you safe?

Your need for safety differs from your caree's; while your caree needs physical safety, you need emotional safety. You need a safe place to honestly discuss your fears, worries, guilts, anger, frustration and resentments.

Find a safe haven this week, a haven that affords you a non-judgmental place to vent. Your safe haven may be your support group, your best friend, your journal, your garden, your solo drives in the car.

Find your safe haven, then use it whenever the emotions overwhelm. You'll feel better when you feel safe.

Sunshine

Illness and disability (and its related home care aides and supplies) can sometimes seem like a black cloud hovering over your home. Your shades are up, but the sun seems to shine in everyone else's house.

You have sunshine—brilliant rays warm your face when you and your caree share special moments; when you find just the right camaraderie in your support group; when you define your limits and stick to them.

The sun shines in your home—because you are there.

Wisdom

The wisdom gained from caregiving is wisdom that can be applied to all aspects of your life.

Consider the Wisdom of Caregiving:

1. That your gut is always right.
2. That life is short, so you must make the most of each moment.
3. That possessions and material things take you only so far in life; your heart and soul take you to your dreams.
4. That a smile and a hug are always worth a million bucks.

Brainstorm the wisdom you've gained from your caregiving role. You'll be amazed at the power you have to live a blessed life.

Vision

Sometimes, caregiving may seem like sun glasses you wear on cloudy days; it's already hard to see, but add the glasses and you feel like you're almost going blind. It seems an unexpected victim of caregiving is your future and your vision of it. Now, it's hard to even visualize what your future will look like.

Caregiving may have changed your vision, but you have the ability to create a new vision that encompasses all your lessons learned as a result of your caregiving experience. Your new vision will have a greater intensity, focus and definition. Because of your caregiving experience, you can develop a more fulfilling vision of your future than you ever imagined.

Today, consider your vision—for yourself and for your caree. Your vision will lead you to the path that's right for both of you. Your vision, when coupled with your gut instinct, is 20-20. Your vision is crystal clear.

Involvement

You and your caree are intrinsically involved by illness; so involved, you feel attached at the hip.

On a regular basis, take time for you both to be alone and involved in a separate activity; for instance, participate in a book club while your caree socializes at adult day care.

And, take time to be involved with each other outside your roles as caregiver and caree. Enjoy time together as mother-daughter, husband-wife, friends.

Look at your involvement as being three dimensional. You are involved as caregiver-caree; you are involved separately in your own activities; you are involved together in your own relationship. A three-dimensional relationship adds blessings to both your lives.

Time Out

We take a break from our words to consider a phrase: Time Out.

The idea of taking time for yourself may seem overwhelming. How in the world can you take time for yourself when you can't take time for all your other responsibilities?

You may find it easier to take a time out. Take a two-, three-, five, or ten-minute, time out. Take a time out to sit in your favorite chair, lie on your bed, breathe in fresh air in your backyard. Use your time outs to re-group and re-charge. And, take as many time outs during your day as you need.

And, on your next time-out, enjoy this quick prayer:

Senility Prayer

God grant me the senility
To forget the people
I never liked anyway,

The good fortune
To run into the ones I do,

And the eyesight
To tell the difference.
(Anonymous)

~ **Fall** ~

Autumn is a second spring when every
leaf is a flower.

~ Albert Camus

Moods

What do you do when your moods seem to be just one thing: Bad?

Bad moods are double-whammies. It's bad enough to have a bad mood. What makes matters worse is the intense guilt that follows.

Ugh.

Don't beat yourself up because of a bad mood. Your bad mood will pass. And, in the midst of a bad mood, seek out a hug. A loving hug can do wonders for those bad moods.

Risk

Take a risk that didn't work? Like hiring a home health aide—who you caree hated? Or, asking a family member to help out—only to be shot down?

After taking a risk that didn't work as you had hoped, you may feel foolish, or silly, or naïve.

Keep in mind what's important: You stepped out of your comfort zone in order to create what you wanted. Creating what you want only happens with risk. Sometime the risk works, sometimes it doesn't. The result isn't reflective of who you are. But the effort—and its inherent courage—is.

Your risks will pay off—just like all your good work will.

Recovery

You're familiar with recovery—as it relates to your caree. Recovery from a procedure, an illness, a set-back.

Have you thought about your recoveries?

Every time you watch your caree lose a skill, or a memory, or a function, you also suffer a loss. And, with each loss, you also need time to recover from your own sadness, disappointment, grief.

Allow time for recovery, to get your bearings, to find your new “normal.” As with all recoveries, you'll have good days and bad. You'll also experience some set-backs. That's okay.

Be gentle with yourself during your recoveries.

Kitchen

A room or an area equipped for preparing and cooking food.

A simple definition for a room that is often the heart of your home. The room where comforting meals, homemade cures, and faithful friendships are created, nurtured, warmed. Without a kitchen, a house is not a home.

Just as a home needs a kitchen, so your soul needs a kitchen, a place that warms, nourishes, fulfills. Your soul's kitchen can be a book that continually comforts, a journal that allows for safe venting, a friendship that never judges. Your soul's kitchen can change from day-to-day, week-to-week, but its purpose stays constant: To support, rejuvenate, enhance who you are.

Today, visit your soul's kitchen.

Vent

Frustrated with your family? Tired of being cooped up with your caree? Mad about the lack of medical help? Red-faced about the waiting room wait?

When you think about it, you have a lot to be mad about.

The problem is, what do you do with all that anger?

Let it out! Let it go!

Find a good way to vent (sharing your frustrations in your journal, support group, garden, daily walk). If you let it go, it lets go of you. Once all that anger lessens its hold on you, you'll find you have more energy—and that can't help but improve your mood and day.

Getting mad is natural. Holding it in isn't. Find a good way to get it out on a regular basis.

Vibrant

You are a vibrant, colorful, beautiful being.

You may feel that caregiving adds a dull sheen to your life. On the contrary, caregiving highlights your priorities, colors your gifts, and magnifies your blessings.

Caregiving is tough. It's awful. It's heart-breaking. It's really, really sad.

But, as with all things, it has another side. It shows you for the vibrant, colorful, beautiful being you are.

Forgive

There are facts of life. And, there are facts of caregiving: Family members will disappoint. Community help will be lacking. The health care system will hinder.

It's so easy to hold a grudge. Holding a grudge may taste like sweet revenge. But, the grudge ultimately will leave a bitter taste. And, you deserve better than that.

Try to forgive. And, most importantly, forgive yourself. You are doing your very best—every day (even on those days you may categorize as “bad”). Your best is always good enough. And, you, above all, are very deserving of your own forgiveness.

(Anti) Angst

Do certain relationships cause you grief,
well, really, angst?

The angst is a red flag that these
relationships don't work for you. Perhaps at
one time they did, but now you've outgrown
them, or found a new perspective, or set a
new boundary. The angst is painful, but
serves an important purpose—a nudge to
move forward from the pain.

Dance away from the angst and dance
toward those relationships that comfort. You
deserve relationships that warm your heart,
support your work, and celebrate your spirit.

Bounty

You may feel like you have a bounty on your head. Everyone wants a piece of you!

But bounty also is your abundance. Your bounty is your ability to rebound from heartache, find solutions when the problems seem insurmountable, and smile when the soiled laundry seems endless.

You have a bounty—but it's not the one over your head. It's your blessings, your gifts, your intelligence.

Enjoy your bounty—you've worked hard for it.

Protect your bounty—it's your daily miracle.

Believe in your bounty—it will multiply.

Tenacity

You'll face temptation during your biggest battles: The temptation to give in, throw in the towel, walk away.

When temptation rears its ugly head, take a break from your battles, but stick to your guns. You'll find a way to win the battle because you have the smarts, gumption and tenacity to do so.

Stay the course.

Lighten

Your load may seem very heavy. You carry the weight of keeping your caree as well as possible, while navigating an unfriendly health care system, pounding the pavement looking for quality help, and rebounding from the pain of so many losses.

How do you lighten your load? Lighten up by letting go. Let go of:

--Resentments toward those who won't (or can't) help. It's hard, but those resentments weigh you down.

--Anger toward the disease which has changed your life (and your caree's) forever. The anger will spill over into other areas of life.

--Guilt that you aren't doing enough. You are doing enough, every day and every minute. You can't possibly do more than you already do.

And, lighten up by embracing. Embrace:

--Opportunities to share special moments with your caree. Your moments today will provide great comfort tomorrow.

--Times to share your gratitudes. Your thanks will bring more blessings.

--Those who embrace you. You are loved. Know it.

Soar—lighten your load.

Love

You do the work—so where's the love?

You've sacrificed; you've re-done, re-worked, re-structured your life. It seems you spend your life cooped up in your car, or looking inside your washing machine, or staring at the pages of the 20-year-old magazine as you wait in the doctor's office. You've done it because it was the right thing to do. Even if you could, you wouldn't change your decision.

But, wouldn't it be nice to hear a "Thanks"? To have someone recognize the critical work you do—every day?

Thank you. Your efforts are amazing, courageous and miraculous.

Thank you.

Trust

Doubts may surface: Doubts about your decisions, your abilities, your choices. Those doubts seem to encourage second thoughts about everything.

When those doubts enter your head and your heart, do your best to replace them with trust. You make loving decisions, you are God-given in your abilities, and your choices reflect your values.

Trust yourself. Think of all that God has entrusted to your care.

Take Care

You probably hear those words so often that you may feel numb to their meaning. Take care? How in the world do you take care when it comes to yourself?

A few thoughts:

- ≡ Take care of yourself in your relationships, choosing to spend your time and energy on those relationships that rejuvenate, support, and, when needed, reinvent you.
- ≡ Take care of yourself during your day, choosing the foods that energize you and an exercise program that strengthens you.
- ≡ Take care of yourself in your spiritual life, choosing to honor your spirit and beliefs with rituals and services that comfort you.

Take care. You deserve it.

Understand

Who understands the heartache and heartbreak of caregiving? It's awful to feel these emotions, but it's even worse to feel them alone.

Having someone in your life who understands the toll caregiving takes is critical.

When you look for support to help you cope with caregiving, be sure to look for support that understands. Know that finding that understanding soul may take some time, a little bit of searching and an open mind. Caregiving is an intense experience understood by those with an empathetic heart. You may find someone who understands in your support group, in your best friend, in your family, at your house of worship, maybe in line at the grocery store, perhaps even sitting next to you at the doctor's office.

But know that the right person will understand. Knowing that makes the search worth its effort.

Appreciation

Because you have moments (or longer) when you hit bottom, you also have moments of pure joy, moments when you know what unconditional love feels like, moments when you see the clarity of life's purpose, moments when you know that you've made the best decisions possible.

These moments are your nuggets of gold.

Appreciate them.

With your appreciation, these nuggets become your ultimate pot of gold.

Perspective

With all the worries, concerns and fears, it's hard to keep a perspective. It just seems all is going wrong.

Today, try to keep your perspective. And, your perspective should always reflect this: You are doing your best under extraordinary circumstances. Because you are doing your best, you cannot do wrong.

And, on those days when you just can't seem to find your perspective, take time off. Decisions and discussions can wait for another day.

All that you do you do with an open heart and a loving spirit. Your best is incredible.

Buy

If you'll listen, you may be tempted to buy what others may try to sell. Some may try to sell you the idea that you don't deserve happiness, that the world is full of problems but no solutions, that life will pass you by while you provide care.

Buyer beware.

In other words: Don't buy that.

Buy this:

- ≡ You deserve happiness each and every day.
- ≡ You have solutions to your problems.
- ≡ Life stops for you when you laugh and love regularly.

These buys are the true bargains with the best pay-offs.

Hold Tight

Hold tight.

- ≡ To your belief in your good work:
Your commitment today will lead to
unimagined pay-offs tomorrow.
- ≡ To your strength in your convictions:
You know best; never fear acting on
your knowledge.
- ≡ To your value: You bring grace and
beauty to our world each and every
day.
- ≡ To your goals: You have the vision to
set goals that reflect the reality and
the dignity of your situation.

Hold tight, for with the holding, comes the
miracles.

Hold tight.

Ride

Just like a bad storm, ride out your bad days of caregiving.

The challenge of your bad days is that they seem really, really loooooong. It also may seem that one bad day just drags into another.

You'll have bad days. That's okay. You can ride them out by surrounding yourself with your storm supplies—whatever you need to have comfort and support. And, feel your bad days because the feeling will become part of the healing.

Good and bad follow each other. The sun does appear after a bad storm—no matter how long it lasts. Believe all will be okay, that the sun will rise. Because it will.

Prioritize

On anniversaries of important days, we're reminded of what's most important in life: Health, happiness, loved ones.

Take time to prioritize, working to minimize what doesn't honor, support and celebrate who you are. Take time to also prioritize your responsibilities, reviewing the demands that have taken too much of a toll for too long of a time. Take time to prioritize your loves, determining which need more of your time and attention. And, take time to prioritize your spirit, emphasizing those activities and relationships that help you shine.

Prioritize so who you are and who you love stay on the top.

Phoenix

Phoenix: A person or thing of unsurpassed excellence or beauty.

It may be hard to see yourself as a phoenix, to see your own beauty and excellence. It can be especially hard to see when you're surrounded by medical bills, incontinence supplies, and loads of laundry. Stack your worries on top and, well, it's hard to see anything but problems.

Know that you are a phoenix, that you have the strength and courage to rise above, to advocate, to find, to understand, to solve and to resolve.

You encompass such tenacity, grace and compassion that you can only be called beauty.

You are a phoenix.

Brave

It's hard to put on the brave face. It can be so hard, so much of the time. On those days, when you are feeling not-so-brave, remember that you have:

- A gigantic heart;
- A golden soul;
- A glorious wisdom;
- A contagious sense of humor.

All these—and more—create your armor of bravery. Even when you don't feel brave, know that you are brave. The brave light lives in you—and it's eternal.

Fight

In many ways, you're in the fight of your life.

Almost every day, you're picking up the sword to fight battles with health care organizations, insurance companies, health care professionals and, sometimes, family members and your caree.

The fights can come fast and furious. How do you stay fit?

Your health is critical. Take care of yourself, make your own health a top priority. Eat right, exercise, believe in yourself and in your skills. You deserve tip-top health. Fight for it.

Treat

How will you treat yourself today?

How about treating yourself to forgiveness?
You always do your best, which means
when you know better, you do better. When
you forgive yourself, you let go of what you
can't change and give yourself the
opportunity to focus on what you can.

Forgiveness means you focus on the present
(to live fully in each moment) and future (to
plan so you can continue to live fully in the
moment). And, those are the healthiest
places for you to be.

Try

Some days, you may think: I can't just try any more.

You've tried some much; some of your efforts have netted great success while others, well, their results have been less than a great success.

And, it seems, just when one effort is paying off, something changes and all must change. You have to try it again.

No doubt about it: It's keep up the energy need to keep trying.

When you're so very, very tired of trying, give yourself a break. Know that you've done your very best, that your efforts, even those that seem fruitless, are critical to the well-being of your career. Your efforts truly make a difference.

Take a break from trying. But, never take a break from believing that your efforts are so truly appreciated by He who really sees your good work.

Seasons

With the change in seasons (from sunny summer to blustery fall) may come the change in your caregiving role. What seemed to be effortless during the warm, bright days of summer (doctors appointments, for instance) now seem to be full of effort as you and your caree bundle up to fight the cold.

Yuck.

Think of the arrival of our new season as an opportunity to hibernate (or an excuse not to rush, rush, rush), to honker down in front of the television, or to read a good book, or to watch a favorite DVD. With this change of season, take advantage of the time you have inside. Scale back on activities; rest. You deserve it.

~ **Winter** ~

In seed time learn, in harvest teach,
in winter enjoy.

~ William Blake

Blizzard

There's a blizzard outside your house—which seems to complement the one inside your house. Your blizzard may be in your heart, swirling with heartache and what-ifs. Your blizzard may be between you and your caree, those blustery winds with ice-cold words you don't mean to exchange.

If you find yourself caught in a blizzard, take cover. Find a quiet spot, close your eyes and repeat, "I am okay. I have the skills and knowledge to manage these caregiving situations. And, I have the love and support I need to survive."

Storms come. You have what you need to weather them.

Touch

Your caregiving experience touches you in way you never thought possible.

But, in some ways, it isolates you, so much so that you forget the wonder of a loving touch, a hug, a hand-hold.

Let your caregiving experience touch you, but be sure to take advantage of physical touches that can be so comforting: Share hugs with your support group members, your family members (even the ones who make you crazy) and with your caree. Make intimacy with your significant other a priority.

You'll be touched.

Selfish

It may just seem so, well, anti-who-you-are. You are self-less, more by nature than by effort (meaning, it's just who you are), and you show your self-less side every day. Certainly, your self-less-ness is commendable. Your self-less-ness has made enormous positive impacts on your family.

Selfish and self-less can coincide, though. You can be selfish at times during the day without taking away from your self-less-ness throughout the day. And, when you commit to being selfish at certain times of the day, you protect your ability to be self-less. Being selfish for a few moments (or longer) during the day simply allows you to recharge your batteries.

Today, focus on making selfish moments a priority during the day. Moments just for you and just about you are moments worth creating.

Drama

In a stressful experience, drama can seem to rear its ugly head so many times that you've named it. The drama occurs between you and your caree, your caree and the home health aide, between you and other family members.

Drama is addictive. It's also destructive.

The next time a comment from your caree or a family member brings you into the drama dance, choose instead to take a step back. Remember: What others say to you is really about them, about how they feel about themselves, their situations, their needs. It may feel like an attack on you, but it's really an attack on themselves misfired at you.

After you take a step back, then take a step away. And, walk away knowing: It's not about you.

When you can avoid taking words and situations personally (the drama), you keep the power. When you take it personally, you give away the power, giving others the power to manipulate you.

Step away. Keep the power.

Advantage

Caregiving may seem to put you at a disadvantage.

How do you take back the advantage?

Here's how:

- Ask questions, often, of everyone, including your caree (when appropriate).
- Acknowledge when you need help.
- Accept help.
- Allow yourself room for trial-and-error, knowing that mistakes may happen.
- Assign responsibilities to others who can help, including volunteers, friends, family, paid professionals.

And, you keep the advantage when say what you want to those who have it. When others know what you want, they often can help you get it.

Opinion

Over the holidays, you see family and friends—and they see you and your caregiving situation. Chances are they have an opinion about your situation—and have expressed it.

It can be overwhelming (and maddening) to listen to opinions expressed by others who have not lived your life day-to-day, minute-to-minute. But know that you always do your best, that you've always handled difficult situations with grace and grit. You've kept a stiff upper lip—and a smile on your face, to boot.

Everyone has opinions. But, few people have your heart.

Shame

Shame can be a powerful emotion in our lives—without us realizing how much power we give it. We may be ashamed that we need help, so put off asking for it. We may be ashamed that money is tight because of our caregiving role, so try to overcompensate by giving too much (especially over the holidays). We may be ashamed at how much anger we have because of our caregiving role, so try to be perfect only to become more frustrated when our imperfections show.

This holiday season, give yourself a great gift: A shame-free life. You are caring, devoted, kind and giving. You are wonderful in all your imperfections—and that's what makes you perfect.

There's no room for shame in your perfection.

De-Grudge

It's so easy to hold a grudge. And, for a time, it can feel so good—until it becomes an unhealthy circle: A sibling won't help, so you won't speak. A friend won't support, so you won't involve. A spouse won't care, so you won't love.

Although it seems that holding a grudge is about getting back at those who hurt you, it's really about hurting yourself. Holding a grudge means internalizing negative feelings—which only hurts you.

Communicate your needs and wants to those in your life. Move on from relationships that don't support you. And, ask for help from professionals when you find yourself involved with others who hold you down rather than raise you up. But, lose the grudge. You'll win back energy to use toward positive, life-affirming activities and relationships.

Quibble

The days are long, the sun sets early, the weather can keep you house-bound. You and your caree may be spending more time together during the winter months than at any other time during the year. And, the more time you spend together, you may find, the more likely you are to quibble.

And, those quibbles are making your long day even longer.

Once the quibbles start, they can be hard to stop. They are habit-forming! If you find yourself locked word-for-word with your caree, then leave the room, change the subject, fix a snack for both of you. Find an activity or a distraction that helps you bite back the words.

Once you beat back the quibbles, you'll take back your day.

Process

When, you wonder, when will you have your answers? When will you know, definitively, why you've been through all of this?

The frustration in waiting for the answers can seem worse than managing your day-to-day struggles.

Keep this in mind: You're in the midst of a process. And, while you're in the process, your role is to experience. What you experience now will help you better understand those answers when they present themselves to you.

You will know your answers. And, going through the process, which means concentrating on your experiences, will make those answers so much more meaningful.

You will know. And, then, you'll be grateful for the process.

Rebound

In basketball, when someone takes a shot and misses, a teammate grabs the rebound in order to take another shot. The team trains to perfect rebounding as much as it does shooting—knowing every shot won't net a score.

Who grabs your rebounds?

You can't make every shot, i.e., solve every problem, meet every caregiving need and handle every situation. You need rebounders.

You deserve rebounders.

Discover

It may seem to be the same ol', same ol' every day. Nothing seems to change.

Looking beyond the surface may be just what you need to break the monotony. This week, take time to discover:

- What generates a smile;
- What brings comfort;
- What dries tears;
- What brightens the day;
- What leads to solutions;
- What minimizes sadness.

With these discoveries, you'll find that what used to seem old now will seem new.

Windows

As winter settles in, you may find yourself feeling trapped—by caregiving, by the weather, by weariness.

Open a window.

Well, maybe not a real window. But a window, nonetheless. A window can be a great book, a fabulous movie, a long-overdue conversation with a dear friend. A window can be scheduling respite care, so you can just be you, even only for a few hours.

A window brings in fresh air. How will you breathe fresh air today?

Bank

What's in your bank?

Some deposits you may want to consider making:

- ≡ Ideas for how you'd like to spend your time off from caregiving so that when the time off arrives, you can take advantage.
- ≡ A Plan B, so if the "What if..." happens, you're prepared.
- ≡ A list of your blessings, so that you can always refer to the list when you're feeling particularly cursed.
- ≡ Postcards of the destinations you'll visit as soon as you can.
- ≡ A list of goals that you'll accomplish, one by one, when the opportunities arise.
- ≡ Reminders (cards, letters, e-mail messages) of good wishes you've received over the years.

By making regular deposits to your bank, you'll have the reserves you need when you need them. It's one of the best investments you can make.

Inspired

Inspired?, you may think. Inspired to do what? Laundry, cooking, cleaning?

While your day may seem to be full of caregiving chores (what is the world record for number of loads of laundry in one day?) you still deserve to be inspired.

Inspired to be:

--Proud: You do your best every day and that's amazing.

--Blessed: You have special gifts that allow you to experience this journey of caregiving;

--Artistic: You have creative juices that are boundless.

--Strong: You know your limits, asking for help when needed.

--Funny: Your sense of humor lightens the heavy loads.

--Respected: You act with dignity in difficult situations.

--Proactive: You ask the "what if" questions so you can prepare for tomorrow today.

--Taken care of: You do get what you give.

Moments of inspiration will appear during your day. They are yours, just yours.

Be inspired.

Drive

What drives you?

You're driven by some emotion, some goal or some belief. Knowing what drives you will help you stay on track.

Today, give some thought to what drives you. You'll know how to keep your gas tank full.

Bricks

You may feel that caregiving—with its worry and responsibility—is sometimes like a ton of bricks that you can carry on your back in a bag.

To lessen the load, take the bricks out of the bag, one by one. Maybe the first brick you remove is the one that represents your fears (of trying new ideas, services or solutions). The second brick could be the one that allows your caree's guilt trip to control too much of your day. And, the third brick? Maybe it's the one the causes you to doubt your decisions.

And, with each brick you remove, consider another use for them. What can you build with them? Why not use them to pave the road that reaches the life you want?

Flexible

Each day (and, often, each minute) brings a new challenge, new obstacle, new lesson to learn, all requiring flexibility.

How do you stay flexible?

--By keeping in touch with other family caregivers (through online or in-person support groups) who can share their solutions and resources;

--By asking health care professionals for ideas and suggestions;

--By staying abreast of the disease process by researching the Internet and reading books, pamphlet and brochures;

--By starting fresh each day, recognizing that you can only control today. You did your best yesterday; you'll do your best again today.

--By keeping your dreams alive, believing your dreams will come true at just the right time.

Your wisdom, insights and energy will help you maintain that flexibility.

Dusk

With the sun setting so early these days, you may feel like you spend most of your day in the dark. And, that seems to reflect how you feel about your life: You're just in the dark.

Know this: Dusk brings dawn. Your dark hours will lead you to lightness, wisdom and knowledge. Your sun will shine again. And, it will shine brighter than you could ever imagine.

Dusk will bring your dawn, a beautiful bounty of colors that reflect who you are. Beautiful.

Smart

During the holiday season, emotions can seem out-of-control. It also seems that with the holidays comes the need to make smart decisions. And, oh!, those decisions are tricky when emotions seem to rule.

How do you take control of your emotions and stay smart in your decisions? Keep in mind this four-step process:

1. Take time to reflect. Find a quiet five minutes. Find the time to reflect as many times as you need. You may just need five minutes. You may need five hours. That's okay.
2. Ask yourself:
 - ≡ Which decision will make me proud in five years when I look back at this time?
 - ≡ What fears do I have about this decision?
 - ≡ Am I making this decision about me —when it's not really about me?
 - ≡ Do I have all the information needed to make a decision?
3. Find:
 - ≡ The information you need.
 - ≡ The person (or persons) who can help you sort through the fears.
 - ≡ An objective perspective.
 - ≡ A supportive sounding board.

4. Make, and communicate, your decision. Know your decision can be revisited if different information or resources become available. Take comfort in knowing your decision was made with a good heart, the right spirit, the best intentions.

Tough decisions require time, reflection and soul-searching. That's what makes them—and you—smart.

Heartache

Even over the din of the holidays, you can still hear it:

Your heart breaking.

This time of year seems to magnify the heartache you feel year-round: Family members who don't help, friends who don't support, a caree who can't get well. You seem to manage the heartache most of the time, but holiday time just makes the heart ache even more.

When you feel your heart ache so much you worry it might break, know that the emotions you feel are valid, that your pain is understandable, that your grief is logical. And, know that reaching out to your support system is the best step you can take. Your support system (your support group, your best friend, your dog, your journal) will wipe away your tears with love and kindness, that same kind of love and kindness that comes so easily to you.

Your heart may ache.

You'll be okay because you deserve to be okay.

Comfort

So much of what you do during the day may cause discomfort. You may feel uncomfortable with some of your duties (assisting with toileting, for instance), some of your responsibilities (managing your caree's money) and some of your messages delivered (telling your caree that driving is no longer an option).

Caregiving can often just seem like living in the Land of Discomfort.

Be sure to keep some kind of comfort nearby throughout the day: Your journal, your Bible, your favorite sayings or quotes, photographs of trusted confidantes, even the phone so you can call your best friend. An item of comfort helps you hang on, so that you can continue to tackle those duties, responsibilities and messages that feel so uncomfortable.

Be in comfort. And, know that your ability to manage the discomfort shows, again, how very special and strong you are.

Celebrate

You see how others do it. You think maybe you should.

But, somehow, you just can't.

This time of year means, to many, a time to celebrate. To you, it may not seem that you have much to celebrate.

Know that celebrations are your creations to make and form.

For instance, you can celebrate in small ways: By setting your alarm clock to go off 15 minutes later one day this week, by calling those who have helped you this year to say "thanks," by giving your caree and other family members an extra hug each day.

Celebrate what you have—and know that what you have lives in your heart: love, kindness and goodness. And, that's worth celebrating!

Lists

Tis the season of lists: To Buy, To Do, To Wrap, To Deliver. Our most well-known do-gooder, Santa Claus, keeps two lists: Who's Naughty and Who's Nice.

It might be a temptation to steal a page from Santa's playbook and make your own Naughty and Nice lists. Your sister-in-law who criticizes your caregiving decisions would make the Naughty list while your cousin who always offers to help would make the Nice list.

While natural to keep track, try to focus instead on just those who do help, support and love you unconditionally. Let the others simply slip by. Focusing only on the good will keep the good coming.

Moving On

With the arrival of the New Year comes the opportunity to move on.

You can look at what's not working in your life and decide to simply leave it in Last Year. Perhaps you leave behind the problems that aren't yours, the guilt that you shouldn't carry, the grudges that only weigh you down.

Move on, leaving behind what now hinders or hurts you. You'll be surprised by the blessings that take their place.

Believe

With all that's happened to you and your family, it may be hard to believe:

- ≡ That good luck is on your side;
- ≡ That good deeds beget good fortune;
- ≡ That good medical decisions mean good results;
- ≡ That others' good intentions create good actions.

In those dark days, when you just can't believe in anything, know that you always can believe in yourself.

Why?

Because you can. More importantly, you do.

Because you do, your goodness will always bring about more goodness. You may not see it today or tomorrow—but you will see it.

And, know that others believe in you, especially your Higher Power.

Believe.

Victory

Perhaps the most difficult caregiving struggle is this: No matter what treatment, specialist or medication is used, your caree's health declines over time. It's easy to let the situation get the best of you.

Think about your role as family caregiver as one who comforts, not necessarily one who cures. In your role, you have the opportunity to increase your caree's quality of life. And, that's tremendous! And, each time you take advantage of an opportunity to improve quality of life, you've scored a victory.

And, those are the sweetest victories of all.

About the Author



Denise M. Brown, Professional Caregiving Coach and Speaker, began working with family caregivers in 1990. She was an early developer of online support groups for

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