

Who Was Supposed To Be Watching Grandma?

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There is a popular tune played this time of year called "Grandma Got Run Over by A Reindeer" which relates that Grandma -- after drinking too much eggnog -- went out into the winter cold to get her medication and was run over by a reindeer. The question is, "Who was supposed to be watching Grandma?"

Though this little tune is just for fun, it may very well raise alarms to many caregivers of the elderly. Caregivers know that even at a holiday party they cannot let down their diligent watch over their elderly loved one. As far-fetched as it may sound, with all the people and noise, an elderly family member with dementia or Alzheimer's may be enjoying the family gathering and then suddenly become confused and walk to the door and leave.

For family caregivers the added stress of the holidays with decorating, shopping, parties and keeping up with all the family traditions is an overwhelming quest. Feelings of isolation, depression and sadness come with this added stress. There are millions of Americans who are caring for elderly frail loved ones and most of these caregivers will go through some of these emotions, especially this time of year.

There are some things you can do as a caregiver to help you and those you care for enjoy the holiday season.

First take care of yourself. Try to eat right, get plenty of sleep and exercise. This will help reduce stress and strengthen your ability to cope with caregiving responsibilities.

Prioritize your holiday traditions. Perhaps instead of cooking a large family dinner, have everyone bring his or her favorite dish. Use paper plates. Forfeit the traditional outside light decorating for a lighted wreath on the front door. Choose one or two parties or concerts to attend instead of trying to do it all.

Arrange for help. Call on other family members to help with the caregiving while you do your shopping or go out for the evening. If family is not available, ask your church group or a neighbor if they would donate a few hours.

Use community services. Many senior centers provide meals for the elderly and supervised activities, onsite, at no charge or a minimal charge. For locating senior services in your state, call your state Area Agency on Aging or check the national locator website at <http://www.n4a.org/>

Use adult day care services. Some assisted living facilities provide day activities and meals for seniors on a day by day basis. Other organizations called "adult day service providers" specialize exclusively in this sort of care support at a reasonable cost. These support services provide respite for caregivers from their caregiving responsibilities as well as social interaction for their elderly family members. There is a cost for adult day services, but the benefit for all is worth it.

For example:

Jean had brought her mother into her home to care for her when mom's Alzheimer's made it impossible for her to be alone. When the Christmas season approached, Jean realized she had to make some choices. She did not want to give up the traditions she had set with her daughters in shopping and lunches, but it wouldn't be possible with her caregiving responsibilities. In searching for a solution, Jean visited an adult day services facility near her home. She found she could schedule the days she needed off for her mother to come in. The adult day services company also provided transportation and would pick up mom and bring her home in the evening.

Although Jean's mother was not sure she would like to go at first, she found she enjoyed the programs, meals and conversation with new friends and the activities provided.

The time it gave Jean to have for herself was worth the extra cost for the day care.

Technology to the rescue. Here is a solution that would have kept "Grandma" from going out in the winter cold and getting run over by a reindeer. Companies that have created monitoring systems, security alarms and other safety equipment are "tweaking" them to adapt to the needs of seniors and their care givers.

Here are a few examples:

- Ankle or wrist bands that monitor location and alert the provider when a person has gone beyond the designated perimeter, such as out the front door of the house.
- Motion detectors. Set throughout the home, motion detectors allow someone outside the home to follow a senior as he or she moves through the house.
- Smart medication dispensers. Live monitoring and dispensing of pills.
- Emergency response alert. At a touch of a button on a desktop monitor, bracelet or necklace, emergency help is summoned.

Whether providing care in your home or helping senior family members in their own homes, your use of monitoring and "tech" help aids can provide extra safety for your loved ones, and peace of mind for you.

You are not alone. Join a caregiving help group. Your local senior center may have one or go on the internet to find one. Hearing about other caregivers' problems and solutions and being able to share your own and ask questions is a great way to relieve stress and gain a new perspective. Check out websites like the National Family Caregivers Association at <http://www.nfcacares.org/>

Work with a Senior Care Professional. Recognize that you are doing the very best you know how. You are not a geriatric health care practitioner, geriatric care manager, home care nurse or aide, hospice provider or family mediation counselor, nor do you have the years of training and experience these professionals have, but you can definitely use their experience. In fact, using a senior care specialist will make caregiving easier for you and more beneficial for your elderly family member.

As an example:

Mark stopped by his father Dan's home every night after work to help with any errands or things he needed around the house. He began to notice that Dan was not showering, dressing or even fixing meals some days. Another concern was his father's growing confusion and disorientation. A trip to the family doctor only brought more concern to Mark, since the doctor claimed it was just the aging process that caused the confusion.

Wanting a second professional opinion on what was best for his father, Mark hired Shelly -- a Professional Geriatric Care Manger -- to do an assessment. Shelly arranged for Mark and Dan to see a geriatrician, who advised that proper meals and an increase in some vitamins, would help clear up the confusion and disorientation. Shelly arranged for a home care company to come in daily to help with personal needs and prepare meals.

Soon Dan was back to his old self and able to function on his own.

You can find a wide variety of care professionals in your area on the National Care Planning Council website at www.longtermcarelink.net.

One more thing to remember. As a family caregiver, the greatest gift you are giving this holiday season is "Love."