

Who Was Supposed To Be Watching Grandma?

By Judith S. Parnes, L.C.S.W., C.M.C

Unfortunately, a song sometimes heard 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?"

Although some may think this little tune is just for fun, it does very well raise realistic 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. 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 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.

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.

Technology to the rescue. Here is a solution that would have kept "Grandma" from going out in the winter cold. 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.

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.

Remember, 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

You are not alone. Join a caregiving help group. 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 an Elder 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 an Elder care specialist will make caregiving easier for you and more beneficial for your elderly family member. Check out the website for the National Association of Professional Geriatric Care Managers at <http://www.caremanager.org>.

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

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