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Caring for the caregiver during special occasions and holidays

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Holidays and special occasions may stir up feelings of anxiety and stress for the caregiver whose life has been affected by caring for someone with cancer. Caregivers may feel out of step, worried, or sad when they think about spending an upcoming holiday or special occasion with loved ones. They may find it especially challenging to keep up with the preparations and responsibilities that often come with commemorating such events.

What's more, long-distance caregivers can feel an added level of stress as they visit family and friends during this time. They may feel an increased financial strain due to travel costs, purchasing gifts, coordinating child care, and taking on added food costs. They may also try fitting too many plans into a few short days to make up for guilty feelings about not being near their loved ones on a daily basis.

All of these sources of additional stress related to these activities can lead to caregivers feeling burned out during a time that should be filled with excitement and joy as loved ones come together in celebration. As we at CancerCare know, some of the common challenges caregivers face during special occasions include

- Taking on too many roles that may come up during special occasions
- Feeling guilty about not doing the things others have come to expect from them

- Hesitating to ask for help
- Coping with a lack of sleep

Emotional issues that caregivers already face may be exacerbated during this time as they focus on taking care of the needs of their loved one. Spending time with family during holidays can bring up past family issues as well.

Depending on the level of illness, the caregiver may be concerned about their loved one's diminishing health, worrying they will not be able to celebrate the holiday or special occasion. They may feel alone or depressed as they stay by their loved one's bedside in the hospital while others outside carry on normal lives.

Oncology nurses can play an important role in helping caregivers take time out for themselves. Caregivers need to be reminded to practice self care whether they are at home or visiting friends and family. Preparing for these milestones may be the perfect time to try new roles, discover strengths, and find additional resources in family, friends, and partners.

Knowing that help is available for practical costs also helps caregivers. Organizations such as CancerCare (www.cancer.org) can provide financial assistance to help with the additional costs that may come up during holidays and special occasions. Caregivers can also visit www.cancerfac.org to search

for financial assistance organizations in their community.

Oncology nurses can offer tips to caregivers to help them cope with the additional stress of the holiday. The following suggestions can help make holidays and special occasions a time to create cherished memories of the time shared with their loved ones.

Acknowledge your feelings Feelings of loss or sadness because cancer has changed a special occasion are a normal experience for caregivers. But some caregivers may feel they have to portray themselves as happy and cheerful so as not to alarm family, friends, or a loved one with cancer. Try not to hold in all your feelings; share them with

someone you trust, such as a loved one or professional counselor. CancerCare's professional oncology social workers can assist you or your loved one as you

A cancer diagnosis affects not only the patient but the entire family.

cope with the emotional and practical concerns of a cancer diagnosis. Call us at 800-813-HOPE [4673] or visit www.cancercares.org.

Do something good for yourself Try to take some time out each day to relax and recharge, even if it is simply listening to music or taking a walk around the block. Or, ask someone to give you a respite.

Recognize that you are doing your best Acknowledge your efforts to care for your loved one and all that you are doing to make a special event memorable and enjoyable.

A cancer diagnosis changes everything and affects not only the patient but the entire family as well. The key is to stay flexible and be open to accepting help. ■

Helen Miller is CEO of CancerCare.



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