

Caregiver tips for surviving the holiday

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By Eileen Beal

The six-week holiday blitz—from Thanksgiving week to New Year's Day—is a mixed bag for caregivers. Along with holiday cheer and merrymaking come extra demands on caregivers's time, energy, and pocketbook and an emotional tidalwave that churns up feelings about losses, missed opportunities, and the future.

So it's not surprising that many caregivers don't just feel financially and physically fatigued during and after the holidays, they feel "blue," too.

"Feeling" blue isn't "being" depressed, explained Benjamin Rose's Assistant Director of Research, Carol Whitlatch, Ph.D.

Ticking off symptoms—generalized stress and anxiety that can show up as loss of appetite, poor sleep, fatigue, irritability, poor concentration, social withdrawal and/or feelings of being overburdened—Whitlatch, whose research focuses on how caregiving impacts caregivers, says: "Depression is a long-term situation, often caused by physical changes in the brain. 'The blues' is situational. When the holidays are over—when things get back to normal—it goes away."

Better than having it go away, however, is to keep it at bay.

That starts with not biting off more than you can chew. "There is a lot going on during the holidays [additional cooking and house cleaning, shopping, family events, etc.], so keep expectations realistic. Don't over-schedule things, and pace yourself," she adds.

To help you do that, prioritize things. Make must do, should do, and want-to do lists, then schedule some—not all!—activities from each list for the holidays.

Don't buy into holiday hype. "You don't have to have a have a Martha [Stewart]-perfect holiday," points out Whitlatch. "You just have to have one that works for you and your loved one."

Don't try to do everything on your own. Involve, or draft, other family members to help with transportation and planning and coordinating outings and family activities. "Most of the time people are glad to be asked," says Whitlatch. "They aren't doing more because they don't know what to do."

Don't shortchange your body. Get enough sleep to renew and recharge batteries. Because it revs up circulation, improves lung function, and increases the flow of natural antidepressants (endorphins, serotonin, etc.) to the brain, exercise regularly. And eat smart. Without the right "fuel"—protein, complex carbohydrates, non-alcoholic/non-caffeinated beverages—the body runs down both physically and mentally, which leaves you more prone to the blues.

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Do things that actively help you relax and de-stress. In the car, at the mall, in line at the grocery store, do deep breathing exercises—inhale for three seconds, hold for three seconds, exhale for three seconds. Rent a funny video. Read a funny book. Spend time with people who make you laugh.

And finally, says Whitlatch, talk (and cry) about issues and/or problems that are escalating anxiety-, stress-, exhaustion-, guilt-, and/or anger-levels. “You feel better when you don’t keep things bottled up,” she explains.

While it seems natural to let off steam with family and friends, it’s more productive to talk with a social work professional or someone at your church or synagogue, says Whitlatch. However, if you are caring for someone with special needs, such as Alzheimer’s Disease or cancer, she suggests finding and joining a support group. The fears, information and insights shared in a group go a long way toward reducing guilt, pressure and stress during the holidays—and beyond.

Several local agencies—the Alzheimer’s Association (216-721-8457), Benjamin Rose (216-791-8000 or 216-791-1730), Jewish Family Services (216-292-3999), United Way’s First Call for Help (216-436-2000), and the Western Reserve Area Agency on Aging (216-621-8010)—sponsor support groups or can put you in touch with them. In addition, the following Internet sites also provide good information: Children of Aging Parents (CAPS), www.CAPS4caregivers.com; National Alliance for Caregiving, www.caregiving.org; National Family Caregivers Association, www.nfcares.org; and Caregivers Handbook, www.acsu.buffalo.edu/~drstall/hndbk0.html.

Books

Self-care for Caregivers: A 12 step approach, Pat Samples and Diane and Marvin Larsen

Taking care of mom, taking care of me, Sima Schloss

The Comfort of Home, Maria M. Meyer and Paula Derr, RN