

Pathways

SERVING FAMILIES AND CAREGIVERS OF BRAIN IMPAIRED ADULTS AND THE FRAIL ELDERLY

Feeling Caregiver Isolation? That's What Friends Are For

Social interactions and making connections with friends can help ease the strain of caregiving. This article first published on Nextavenue.org



IN MAY 2023, the U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy released a report about the “devastating impact of loneliness and isolation.” In that report, he states, “Our relationships are a source of healing and well-being hiding in plain sight—one that can help us live healthier, more fulfilled and more productive lives.”

Murthy states that maintaining relationships may be “hiding in plain sight.” Still, social interactions with friends, even old ones, may seem unlikely for those immersed in the intensity of caregiving.

But the data is compelling. Socializing is a way of easing the strain of caregiver isolation. In other words, wanting a life outside caregiving isn't selfish but part of self-care. As the care partner for my husband after his dementia diagnosis, I could feel the isolation creeping in. My family was there for me but focused on what was happening in our household.

The FILM Club

Like many caregivers, I felt my friends had disappeared. Did they leave me

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"Caregiver Isolation" continued from page 1 . . .

because they couldn't handle hearing about my life? Some did. But I stopped reaching out, even to old friends who knew me well. I wasn't making it easy for them to enter my life, and I wasn't doing even the most minor things to show them I was still part of theirs. Still, I was longing for their companionship. I also needed a way to change my scenery and leave the house.

That's when I created my treasured FILM club. It is a good example that others can replicate around any common interest with a few friends. A warning: we have had to limit membership because others keep asking to join.

It's simple. I love movies. I went down my contact list and emailed any woman who I thought might be fun to be with. They could participate if they liked films and wanted to meet once a month to see a movie in a theater, followed by a dinner discussion. We started with nine women who didn't know anyone but me. We now have twelve members who range in age from mid 50s to mid 70s.

During COVID, we watched movies in our homes around selected themes and then had Zoom conversations. And like any group of women, our discussions veer into all realms of life. The remarkable thing about this group is that twelve women who didn't know each other have become devoted friends. They have branched off in twos or fours to attend concerts, travel the world or just talk. And every month, we all gather to share in our beautiful friendship.

This engagement sounds so ordinary, but there were, and still are, a few exceptional circumstances. When we began, I was caregiving for my husband. Soon after, another member was too. Knowing we had a standing FILM club date, we were able to find companions for our spouses well in advance. Two of the original members were recent widows, and later, two others would lose their husbands. We needed to balance the entertainment part of being together with support and sensitivity for their grief.

One year, a member suffered a stroke, which required some accommodations. Luckily, she is back as a full participant. Some miss dates because they are adventuring around the world. They come back sharing tales from their trips, while those who can't travel experience it vicariously. We are experiencing life in ways we couldn't ever

have imagined, and we are not doing it alone. We are together!

When we realized we were about more than movies, we renamed the F.I.L.M. Group—Finding Inspiration Living Magnificently. We even have a logo and T-shirts.

Being Mindful and Intentional

Finding friends you want to be with doesn't have to be a "club," a formal endeavor or another arduous task.

The first step is to be intentional. I started saying "yes" to invitations I might have turned down to avoid the hassle of making sure my husband was attended to. I made it happen because it was vital for me. I also took the initiative to reach out to others, consciously steering away from those associated with caregiving or dementia.

The next step is to be mindful that there are two types of people in your midst. There are those I call "Heartwarmers," who will energize you. They just know what to do, or at least they try. Then there are others I call "Heartbreakers," who suck up the energy you don't have to spare. They seem clueless. I avoided the Heartbreakers and embraced the Heartwarmers.

But even my Heartwarmer friends never realized that while well intended, they would begin most conversations asking about my home situation. I appreciated their concern, but I needed a break, something else to consider. And to make it worse, when asked, I couldn't resist elaborating on my struggles, making them uncomfortable and not knowing how to respond.

Our interactions became a pity party. To change this, I consciously reframed the conversation. All it took was me to ask a few questions about their vacation or a news headline. We always talked about my husband, but I gave a quick and honest response instead of a detailed account. Sometimes just saying, "It isn't getting easier."

In his book, "Friendship in the Age of Loneliness," Adam Smiley Poswolsky defines friends as "a group of people who uplift one another and form a safety net for all of life's moments." Caregiving is one of those moments, and that's what friends are for.

Caregivers

The long journey we shared with our loved one has been over for years. We appear to be back to living full lives. But we are always caregivers, with our painfully-gained knowledge and skills. Now we give of our time to help new caregivers, some of whom have become mired in emotions, overwhelmed, and nearly unable to function. We were there once, in that dark and lonely place. Now we listen, give advice, and hugs. Somehow new caregivers work through their challenges and begin to take back control of their lives. And we are rewarded in seeing the small steps by which that begins to happen—a confident stride, a smile, a laugh. —*Jon Peterson*

INVITATION TO CONTRIBUTE TO CAREGIVER'S COLUMN

We invite you to submit original work (poetry and prose) to be featured in upcoming newsletters. Send submissions directly to crc@deloro.org or complete the form on our website www.deloro.org. If you reference or borrow from specific sources, please be sure to cite them properly. **Submit no later than Friday, August 9, 2024 to be considered for our Fall 2024 issue.**



Join the Sacramento region on **Thursday, May 2, 2024**, for a celebration of philanthropy! Our community will come together for one Big Day of Giving, a 24-hour giving challenge that brings together the region's nonprofit community to help raise much-needed unrestricted funds and shine a spotlight on the work nonprofits do to make the region the place we call home. We hope your heart is with the Del Oro Caregiver Resource Center, serving family caregivers of brain-impaired adults and the frail elderly in our region.

Visit us at
<https://www.bigdayofgiving.org/donate/delorocares>
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2023 Cruise Around the World Recap

On August 9, 2023, Del Oro Caregiver Resource Center held our **18th Annual Cruise Around the World Cook-off and Fundraiser** in Sacramento. This fun event supports the efforts of Del Oro, allowing us to expand much-needed services to family caregivers in our community.

At the heart of the event is a cook-off competition between local senior care providers. There were two phases to the competition—professional judges and crowd favorites. The professional judge panel consisted of Taro Arai, Owner of Mikuni Sushi; Tina Macuha, Good Day Sacramento; Laurel Sagen, Laurel Buys Houses, and Teresa Urkofsky, Chef Instructor with American River College. The panel of judges scored each participant on the presentation of the food, taste, originality, and authenticity to the region or country the culinary partner chose. We are pleased to announce this year's winners:

First Place—Carlton Senior Living,

Representing Jamaica with Jamaican Jerk Chicken

Second Place—Oakmont and Ivy Living,

Representing Latin America with Braised Chicken Empanada

Third Place—Greenhaven Place,

Representing Mexico with Tacos

The event attendees voted for **"Crowd Favorite!"** which was Oakmont and Ivy Living with their Braised Chicken Empanada.

Congratulations to all of our winners!!

Thanks to the generous support of our sponsors, culinary partners, and attendees, Del Oro raised just over \$43,000 to provide vital services to family caregivers in our community! We appreciate your support of our mission and goal to improve the well-being of family caregivers throughout their journey.

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