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Encouragement For The Caregiver



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Encouragement For The Caregiver

2 Cor 1:3-4, "Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God."

Is caregiving a burden or an opportunity? The frame of mind of a caregiver will certainly change how they respond to this question. Without doubt, it can be a thankless job. A caregiver is asked to wear many hats- from encourager to physical support to logistics- all the while attempting to remain stable themselves! From meeting the needs of small children, nurturing a sick spouse or caring for aging parents, the demands of caregiving can hit a person at any age and stage of life. Often the role of a caregiver is anticipated, such as a couple preparing for their first child. At other times, the role can come upon someone quite unexpectedly. A medical diagnosis or an accident can change a person's life in a heartbeat and in turn, affect those closest to them on a deep level, changing their lives as well.

What can never be fully anticipated is the weight and level of emotional and physical strain a caregiver can feel, especially in the more difficult circumstances. Physically, caregiving may require long hours with little sleep. Relationally, the bond between the caregiver and person receiving care is continually evolving. While the caregiver may feel the need to remain strong, under the surface they may be grieving an impending loss or managing fears regarding the future unknowns. At the same time, they are a firsthand witness to the rollercoaster of emotions felt by the one receiving care and often can absorb some of these feelings. If not guarded against, this strain can accumulate over time- perhaps even to a level that can hinder functioning in a caregiver. To guard against this accumulation of emotions, consider the following advice:

1. **As a caregiver, consider your own legitimate needs.** On an airplane when the flight attendant reviews the procedures for crisis, everyone is told to put their own oxygen mask on first. Once a passenger has secured their own safety, they can then help the person next to them. This order is well-recognized as standard procedure to ensure everyone's well-being on a flight, however, this order is often overlooked in caregiving. Caregivers should ask themselves, what is my "oxygen mask" and how can I integrate these needs into my life so my caregiving is sustainable? If you try to help others but neglect your own lifelines, you will not only hinder yourself but also your ability to help anyone else.
2. **Build in a daily activity you look forward to.** Discouragement and hopelessness can begin to set in when someone does not have something enjoyable to anticipate. Even if this activity (such as reading a book, coloring, enjoying a walk) is only 15 minutes long, consider how to make this addition to your day.
3. **Identify your supports.** Who is taking care of you during this time of caring for others? Who are the people you can call for encouragement or when you need to process unpleasant news? Every caregiver needs to have their own team of supports to help them carry the heavy load they feel. While your team will not be able to fully step into your role, they can lift you up in prayer, help attend to needs and provide emotional support through trying times (*Gal. 6:2*).
4. **Evaluate your pace.** Is there an end in sight or is the stage of caregiving you find yourself in unknown or lengthy? Many times, caregiving begins with a rush of adrenaline that soon wears off. Make sure you are preserving energy for the demands ahead of you. By answering the question "Am I running a sprint?" (caregiving needs will be short-lived) or "Is it a marathon?" (needs will exist for months/years) better helps you set proper boundaries and realistic expectations.
5. **Renew your Strength.** *Isaiah 40* states, "They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength," which offers a comforting promise in the midst of challenges. As caregivers try to pass along grace and comfort to others, they will quickly run dry if they only pull from their own strength. It is imperative to renew yourself daily in the Lord. The Lord is the only lasting source of strength and power, for He is the only one who "fainteth not, neither is weary."

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Whether the situation was anticipated or unexpected, caregiving can be an opportunity for personal refinement and growth. These circumstances can take a person deeper to the Lord or can cause them to push away in bitterness and discouragement. As a church family, consider those within your congregation in caregiving roles. How can you best come alongside caregivers during this time? They need the love, prayers, and often, tangible support of others as they travel on their caregiving journey.

One final encouragement to the caregiver: *“Be strong and of good courage,”* for the source of true strength is at your side. In the midst of dark days, Jesus sees your toils and strains and will continually sustain you. He knows your circumstances and will redeem it in His time. Great is His faithfulness.