

KindEthics Newsletter: Getting Caregivers to Ask for Help – Viki's Four-Step Process

Quote: Too often we underestimate the power of a touch, a smile, a kind word, a listening ear, an honest compliment, or the smallest act of caring, all of which have the potential to turn a life around. Leo Buscaglia

I have never been very good at asking for help and like many family caregivers, I didn't think that my own needs mattered. Thinking I had to do everything all the time caused me to have two breakdowns; once during my early years of caregiving and again the last year of my caregiving journey. (I was a caregiver for over 17 years.)

I wish I had known about the following statistics from the MetLife Study:

Family caregivers experiencing extreme stress have been shown to age prematurely and this level of stress can take as much as 10 years off a family caregiver's life.

40% to 70% of family caregivers have clinically significant symptoms of depression with approximately 25%-50% of these caregivers meeting the diagnostic criteria for major depression.

Stress of family caregiving for persons with dementia has been shown to impact a person's immune system for up to three years after their caregiving ends thus increasing their chances of developing a chronic illness themselves.

I don't know which statistic frightens me the most. But I do know that I have paid an emotional, physical and financial cost for being a caregiver. (I also loved taking care of my family.)

But it didn't have to be that way. I could have and should have asked for help. But I am a caregiver and when people told me, "Just make time for yourself," it wasn't that easy.

If you think about who in a family becomes the caregiver, it will usually be the person who is more nurturing and generous with their time. So by nature, the caregiver is the type of person who already gives more than others. And this becomes a vicious cycle of give – give – give instead of give – receive – give – receive.

I recently said to my friend who is an overwhelmed caregiver, "Maybe now is a good time for the rest of your family to learn what they need to do to help their grandfather." What I heard back from her were lots of excuses:

*They don't want to help
They don't know what to do
They don't know him like I do
They will just make it worse*

*I don't have time to teach them
It is just easier if I do it
I get tired of asking
I don't think they would help, even if I asked
Why should I have to ask, they should just know what to do
I don't want to be a bother
It is too much effort to ask*

Sound familiar? I realized in that moment that it isn't always that the family won't help; it is the caregiver who is resisting asking for help. So let me ask you. If you had a broken shoulder, would it be okay to ask someone to carry your groceries to the car? If your car broke down, could you call for a tow truck? When your loved one needs help, don't you get them the help you need? Then why don't you deserve the same attention? **Your needs matter and you deserve to have someone help you.**

Viki's Four-Step Process

Step 1:

I encourage you to explore what is keeping you from asking. Write down what goes through your head when someone says, "You should just ask for help." What are your resistance statements?

Step 2:

Take your list of resistance statements and put a statement beside it to help you get past what has been preventing you from asking for help. Here are a few examples caregivers have come up with:

*They don't want to help – Well I don't know this because I haven't given them a chance
They don't know what to do – I could teach them
I don't have time to teach them – You don't have time because nobody is helping you.
If you teach them now, then they can help at other times in the future.
It is just easier if I do it-- Only the first time.
Why should I have to ask, they should just know what to do – Would I have known what to do before I became a caregiver? Then how would they know?*

I am not saying you will be able to get past your barriers right away, but you need to begin so you won't break down like I did. One thing that helped me was to realize that the other person won't do what needs to be done as well as I would. They may do things slower, awkwardly at first, and in their own way. But that is okay because you are going to get free time and your loved one will be okay.

Step 3:

Make a list of all the things that would help you such as practical, emotional, financial and information support. Write a really long list and carry it with you so when people say, "What can I do to help?" you can pull out the list, hand it to them, and ask them what they would like to do.

Ask for specific things:

Can you call mom each week and ask her about her favorite memories or talk to her about what is worrying her?

Can you call me every day to check on me? (This can be very helpful to keep your depression under control.)

I don't have time to read this book about Maria's disease. Can you read it and then send me the main points?

Can you research what is the best wheelchair to buy?

People can help from a distance:

Can your brother listen to Dad's doctor's appointment by speaker phone?

Can they do the shopping for groceries online and have the food delivered?

Could they pay for someone to come to the house to give you a massage?

Can they take over paying the bills or set up automatic bill pay for you?

Can they send \$51 a month so you can pay for three hours of respite care?

Ask someone to create a phone tree to disseminate information. This way you don't need to make all the calls. Have others spread the news.

Local help:

Mom needs a ride on Thursday for her haircut.

Could you pick up some milk and eggs when you go to the store today?

I need someone to come and clean my kitchen.

Can you sit with Bob on Thursday night so I can go to a class about coping with dementia?

These are just a few ideas. I am sure you can come up with lots of ideas, big and small. (Don't hesitate to put everything on the list. You will be surprised by what people are willing to do.)

Step 4:

Ask a lot of people. You may need to ask 5 people to find one that will help you but that is okay because now you have one person who will help you. Ask people for things they can actually do. Different people have different abilities. Show them the list and let them choose what they would be comfortable doing. Tell them the deadline for when the task needs to get done.

Oh no, I hear your resistance statement coming through. "There is nobody I can ask." Here is my response to break through your resistance. There are more people in your circle of friends, family and community than you think. Call a local faith community and ask for help. (You don't even need to belong to that church or synagogue.) Call the Area Agency on Aging in your town and tell them what you need. They can help connect you to resources. Tell the people in the hair salon about the struggles you are facing and maybe they know someone who can help. Many high schools are requiring kids to do community service hours. Call the school and ask to have someone assigned to help you.

It may feel like a lot of work to begin to ask, but don't let this stop you. This is another of those resistance issues. Remember that you are not just asking for this one time, you are training this person for the future. If you can get them to trained and used to helping, they might be able to help you every week or two.

Lastly, **give gratitude** even when you think your family should feel obligated to help. Of course they should but let's be realistic. Our practical goal is to get them to help more than they have been. Saying thank you and giving words of appreciation go a long way to reinforce good behavior. And if that doesn't work, you can always say, "If you don't have time to help, then you are going to have to pay to hire someone to help me." That will get their attention.

Have a kind and respectful day.

Are You Experiencing “Care-grieving”?

You are normal if you are experiencing “Care-grieving.” This is the grief and loss that comes with caring for and caring about a loved one. Not only is caregiving exhausting overwhelming, frustrating and emotionally draining, it is also associated with profound grief.

So why might you be caregrieving?

You may be grieving because your aging parent isn't the person they used to be. You used to look to them as the person who supported and nurtured you and now they can no longer be that person. Your parent may still be physically alive but the parent you knew is already gone.

You may also be caregrieving because you realize that your aging parent is going to die. Unfortunately, many times nobody will speak to you about this. They tell you to stop worrying needlessly or to put on a happy face. But this grief is real and normal. Each day, as you witness the changes in your parent’s physical and mental abilities, your grief grows. Try to find somebody that you can talk to about your anticipatory grief. That is the grief that we begin to feel when we anticipate an upcoming loss. Sometimes this loss comes slowly and sometimes it rushes toward us. Either way, it is painful and difficult.

Your grief may be about the fact that your life has changed dramatically. Maybe you had to quit work. Maybe you don't have time for yourself anymore. Maybe you know that you aren't being as good of a parent to your own kids as you used to be. Maybe you have to pay your parent’s bills. All of these changes come with a sense of loss. It doesn't mean you're a bad person if you feel angry or sad or frustrated. You are normal and your grief is normal.

Maybe your grief is about your own mortality. Maybe you just realized that when your parents die, your turn will be next. I know that I hated it the first time somebody reminded me that I am now an orphan. When I was 40 years old, my parents died within eight months of each other. I hated being told I was an orphan because it reminded me of how much I had lost and that now, I was the next generation in line to die.

There are so many other ways you may be caregrieving. You may feel like you're missing out on life. Your health may be deteriorating. You may want to run and hide. You may wish your parent would just go ahead and die. Oops. Was I supposed to say that aloud? Probably not, but I know people have said it to me in whispered tones. Those who said it were good, loving, amazing children of aging parents. Caregrieving can become so overwhelming that it creates in us a sense of needing to survive. It's not that we wish our parents were gone, we just wish our pain was gone. Those who have said it to me continued to give and to love and to support their parents. But they needed to reach out for support for themselves as well.

Ultimately, you can't get around grief. You have to get through it. You have to experience it and allow the emotions to be felt and heard. You need to do it with appropriate people and in appropriate ways. Please reach out for support from your family, your friends, your religious leaders, from local support groups, from online forms and chatrooms and from anyone else that is willing to listen. If it is getting to be too much, seek professional help.

Caregrieving is normal but ongoing suffering is not. Please get help whether it is getting someone to relieve you for a few hours or days while you take a break or from somebody at a distance who could listen to your complaints.

Have a kind and respectful day.

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www.KindEthics.com

www.TheCaregiversPath.com

Online Caregiver Support Group - www.TheCaregiversPathCommunity.com

Award Winning Book - The Caregiver's Path to Compassionate Decision Making - Making Choices for Those Who Can't

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