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Five Secrets of Caregiving: Learning from Home Health Aide Pros

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In this season of gratitude — as well as our second holiday season of being in a pandemic — one thing I’m sure many of us are grateful for are the caregivers in our lives. It’s an enormous responsibility in the best of times, and the pandemic certainly has made things even more challenging when it comes to caregiving.

“I try to bring everything to the people I care for — comfort, joy, peace and, most important, fulfillment,” says Joan Cumberland, a home health aide who works for the agency I head, VNSNY [Partners in Care](#). She and her colleagues have some words of wisdom that can help family caregivers position themselves and their loved ones for success, no matter what challenges they may be facing.

Make a plan (and then be flexible). With our professional caregivers, the plan of care is their North Star. They are guided every day by the carefully drafted plan that includes the nursing, therapy, social work, and doctors’ appointments, as well as the home health aide and other services needed to keep someone safe and as healthy as possible at home.



Family caregivers should have a plan of care, too, whether you develop it on your own or in partnership with professional caregivers. Assess your loved one’s mental and physical needs throughout the day and in the longer term, and develop a plan to meet those needs. Bolster the plan of care by keeping good records: Use a notebook to keep important medical, financial and insurance information, to keep track of your loved one’s health status regularly, and to document questions to ask the doctor.

Keep in mind that the plan of care will surely change, as the person you are caring gets better or progresses to another phase of his or her illness. Look and listen for changes in sleeping and

eating patterns, physical strength and emotional wellbeing, as well as symptoms associated with the progression of illness.

Be patient. When asked her secret to caregiving and what she’s learned most from her patients, home health aide Sherry Bobb is unequivocal: “Patience. Patience. You must have patience.” When people are ill or frail, everything — waking up, eating meals, getting around — may take longer. Avoid putting yourself in a position of being rushed; build in extra time to get places where timeliness matters, like a doctor’s visit or going to church. Patience also includes recalibrating what success looks like. Let yourself take pride in making your loved one smile or getting a good meal on the table.

Listen closely. Hand in hand with patience comes active listening, which means going beyond trite questions and answers. Ask open-ended questions, then give your loved one the space to talk — and listen to what they say. Even when a question is not answered directly, the conversation can tell you a lot about what someone needs and may give clues to how you can help. Playing back what they’ve said to you and posing gentle follow-up questions can help you find out what might be going unsaid.

For example, perhaps your loved one is not taking their medication properly. Rather than getting angry or insisting they take it, engage first in active listening to find out what’s behind their actions. Maybe it’s because they forget to take it or are confused. If that’s the case, a pill box and medication reminders can help tremendously. Maybe the medication upsets their stomach, and they should take the pill with food or seek an easier-to-digest option from their doctor. Or maybe they don’t understand what it’s for, and a conversation with a clinician can help them appreciate the medicine’s importance to their health.



Get educated. Home health aide Joan Cumberland always dreamed of being a teacher — an aspiration she now fulfills each day as a home health aide. “I teach people to take care of themselves, so I’m actually living my dream,” says Joan. As a family caregiver, learn what you can about the medical condition or conditions at hand. You are an important part of the care team.

By knowing what your loved one is going through and what to expect, you can put coping strategies in place. When you learn that people with dementia often experience “[sundowning](#),” an increase in anxiety and disorientation beginning around dusk, you can focus on scheduling activities such as doctor’s

appointments earlier in the day and come up with soothing activities to calm restlessness. If you know that diabetes might affect your father’s eyesight down the road and he is an avid reader, suggest books on tape or podcasts from his daily newspaper.

Seek partners. When it comes to caregivers seeking and receiving help, I firmly believe in the 3 A’s:

- Ask for help
- Accept help
- Appreciate help

This is such a central part of caregiving that the company where I work, VNSNY Partners in Care, built it right into the name. Partners to help you care for your loved one may include a professional home care team or connections with community resources such as senior centers, services for the blind or Meals on Wheels. Partners may also include people or a place providing [respite care](#), which provides you a short-term break from the 24/7 challenges of caregiving.

It takes a village to help someone grow old stay safe and healthy at home, so don’t be afraid to delegate. Maybe your adult children visit your elderly mother now and then, to give you a break. What if they came more regularly — say, every Sunday night for takeout, so you can go to dinner with a friend? When others are in charge, make sure they know the game plan — and then *trust* them.

Thankfully, there are many places to seek additional resources for caregiving tips and support. Here are a few places to begin:

- [AARP](#), a wealth of resources, advice and information for caregivers
- [Family Caregiver Alliance](#), for support resources including a state-by-state guide
- [National Alliance for Caregiving](#), a coalition of national organizations focused on family caregiving issues
- [National Institute on Aging](#), a source of research and information on aging and age-related health issues
- [Visiting Nurse Service of New York](#), providing caregiver support from one of the largest not-for-profit home-and community-based health care organization in the United States
- [Veterans Administration](#), offering support and services for families caring for veterans
- [Well Spouse Association](#), offering support for individuals caring for a spouse