

The Northland Caregiver Podcast

Episode 4: Caregiver Tips to Reduce Holiday Stress

Leeza: Welcome to the Northland caregiver, a podcast that's all about providing support to family and unpaid caregivers looking for helpful information and advice on how to safely and effectively care for aging loved ones, family members, friends, and themselves along the way. I'm your co-host, Leeza Ochsner, from Duluth Aging Support, a nonprofit behind this podcast on a mission to help enhance the lives of older adults and caregivers in the Northland through outreach, awareness, advocacy, and collaborative partnerships. And here with me is your host, educator, and occupational therapist, Dr. Mary Lou Donovan.

Welcome back to another episode of The Northland caregiver. I'm your co-host, Leeza Ochsner, with Duluth Aging Support. And with me is your host, Dr. Mary Lou Donovan.

Mary Lou: Welcome back, everyone. And thank you so much for tuning into the fourth episode of our podcast.

We know that being a caregiver for a loved one can be challenging any time of the year. But during the hustle and bustle of the holidays, it can quickly become even overwhelming physically, mentally, and emotionally.

That's why the focus of today's episode is about sharing helpful tips to make caregiving go a bit smoother during the holidays, as well as addressing some changes you might notice as you're catching up with aging family members.

Leeza: With so much of the holiday season being virtual last year, I think it's safe to say we're all probably feeling the pressure of creating the perfect quote-unquote holiday experience this year.

But it's also important to mention that we don't need to place a lot of pressure on ourselves to do things the way they've always been done before, especially when we're caring for aging family members that are experiencing some physical or cognitive changes.

Mary Lou: Absolutely, Leeza. While the holidays can be a special time with family. This is also the turn you may become more aware of changes in a parent or grandparent. Maybe mom or dad used to be able to make the holiday doings look easy with big meals, the house decorated just so, and plenty of details attended to. But you may be surprised to see that the house is not quite as tidy as before. The favorite pie recipe mom or grandma used to make can't be recalled anymore, or conversation attempts produced confused looks from one of your parents.

A friend of mine who is a family law attorney told me she sees an increase in business from family members right after the holidays because of changes that they've recently

observed when home visiting an older adult family member or more than one family member.

Perhaps someone in your family is experiencing difficulty getting up from a chair or has to have information repeated multiple times because they can't hear. You might notice them tripping frequently or hanging on to countertops and tables as they walk around the home. Or they might shut down and withdraw, even asking to go to bed and stay in there for most of the gathering time.

Leeza: I'm really glad you brought that up because this can bring up a lot of concerns around a loved one safety, especially if they're wanting to stay in their home. So, what kind of advice would you give to some of our caregivers as they navigate some of these changes.

Mary Lou: As a caregiver, you may not realize that you've started doing things for the person with a limitation as it just becomes part of your daily routine. However, visiting family members may notice changes in an older family member and ask questions. Caregivers may wonder about how to answer these questions.

So, my recommendation would first listen to what others are telling you about their observations. Second, stop and take a breath and acknowledge their input. And third, suggest that you have a family meeting at a later date to discuss the concerns and that you'd really just prefer to enjoy the holiday gathering.

And then follow through on setting up a time for that meeting. Because honestly, addressing concerning issues at a holiday gathering may put everyone on edge. So, save that for another day. If a visiting family member sees an older adult struggling to get out of a chair, ask them if they need a hand. That's let this lets them, that older adult, choose what help they receive. And it helps them maintain their dignity. Or, if you see a person leaning on tables or counters to walk around, you could offer to walk them down the hall to their destination. They may need help cutting up that Turkey; again, make sure you ask if they need help. And remember to be helpful and not overbearing.

Leeza: So, what about if you're a caregiver who is going into a situation where you maybe know one of your family members has some type of dementia or cognitive loss? What kind of changes might they anticipate as caregivers, and what's the best way to handle them?

Mary Lou: If you know one of your family members has some type of dementia or cognitive loss, you may be worried about how spending time with that person's going to go this holiday season? Will they be the same that they were the last time you saw them, maybe a bit forgetful but still be able to carry on a conversation? Or will their dementia have progressed; this can produce lots of fear and anxiety for many people.

It's really the fear of the unknown if you will. Learning more about dimension and how that changes a person's thinking and also their visual abilities is a good idea prior to attending a holiday event.

At the time of the visit, you want to get a feeling for that person's ability level and then act accordingly. So here are a couple of examples:

If the person, you seem to notice that the person doesn't seem to be hearing you, ask them if they have hearing aids? Do they have them in, and are the batteries working? If not, help make that happen. You may have to speak a little slower or use fewer words in a statement so they'll understand your message. But be sure not to sound like you're talking to a child. You may need to reintroduce yourself. But don't ask them to tell you your name. If they don't remember, they don't remember, and it could lead to a lot of embarrassment for them.

So, another important point is to pause and wait for them to give you an answer. This waiting time can feel like forever. But most people will give you some sort of response.

If they don't seem to be seeing things, perhaps, because their visual field has decreased. Meaning they're not looking out as far as they used to be able to look out and take information in. Or maybe there's too much glare in the room. Those are reasons why people might not be seeing things. So, decrease the glare by closing blinds or curtains or have the person reposition themselves in a spot with less glare. And move things that you want them to see closer to them by placing it, oh say, within an arm's reach.

No matter what situation you're in as a caregiver, we can all recognize the holidays can be great or stressful. And it's important that you don't place unnecessary pressure on yourself to have the perfect holiday. And to do the things the way they've always been done. If you try to maintain the status quo approach for the holidays, you're likely going to feel even more exhausted and resentful about the whole thing once it's said and done. And that doesn't make for a great holiday experience, does it?

Leeza: And as caregivers, it's so important that we take some time this holiday season to also take care of ourselves.

So, what are some tips that can help our caregiver listeners out there reduce some of that holiday stress and take better care of themselves along the way?

Mary Lou: Well, as one of the caregivers for my mom who had vascular dementia, I have a lot of great tips to share that we used to spend the holidays together. I come from a big family. I have seven siblings and 18 nieces and nephews, many of whom have started their own families. So, family gatherings for us are always big and typically loud and can be too much even for someone who doesn't have any cognitive challenges.

So, a strategy that I found helpful when my mom was still alive and we were going into our large holiday gathering time was to decrease distractions for her. I knew all the noise and commotion and people would overwhelm my mom. She was not able to initiate conversations at that time, but she could participate in one if someone else started it and distractions were eliminated. So as my mom sat in a comfortable chair in a quiet corner, I encouraged my siblings and nieces and nephews to approach my mom one by one and just talk to her. First, tell her their name and what they've been up to, so she knew who she was talking to. She really enjoyed that, and she was able to stay longer at the holiday gathering than she might not have because she could engage with family members during that time. I also gave my mom a job to do by having her help with some of the meal prep. She was still very capable of safely using a paring knife. So, I had her cut up apples and celery for a salad. And she loved being able to contribute to being part of the helpers.

And lastly, I made sure to check in with my mom at various times throughout the day to see if she needed anything like help getting to the bathroom. Then I would guide her to the room in a discreet way, so her dignity and privacy were kept intact. Now while some of these things might seem minor, they really allowed my mom to catch up with her grandkids and kids and feel like she'd made a meaningful contribution to the meal, and she was able to stay for a longer time at her family gathering.

Leeza: Those are really great tips, Mary Lou. And sounds like a win-win outcome for everyone in the family. You mentioned your mom had vascular dementia. What are some other helpful tips or resources to reduce holiday stress for caregivers that are taking care of someone with dementia?

When you're taking care of someone with dementia, it's really important to note that the person with dementia often does best when sticking to their routine as much as possible. And since holiday doings can often throw a routine way out of whack, it can be helpful to think about portioning out visits and meals so their routine isn't overly interrupted and builds in rest and quiet time into their schedule.

Leeza: I can see how a routine could quickly get interrupted during the holidays. So, I think that's a really great tip and reminder for our listeners.

Mary Lou: There are tons of great resources out there to help caregivers navigate this busy and often hectic time of year. I'm going to share information from two resources today.

The first resource is the Family Caregiver Alliance, which featured an article called *Caregiving in the Holidays, From Stress to Success*. In this article, it urges us "to keep in mind that the holidays can, in fact, provide unique opportunities to seek better communication, connection, and support from family and friends." That was a direct quote from that article.

While it's difficult to know how much to communicate about a person's decline in cognitive or physical function, being honest with family and friends about the day-to-day realities of your caregiving situation gives others the chance to respond with help. If you're not going to see many of your family and friends over the holidays, another way to communicate your situation is to describe it in a holiday card (as long as the tone of your note doesn't induce guilt). It will help others to know what you're experiencing and open the door for additional support you may need physically or emotionally. Another thing you can try before the holidays is writing up a wish list of things you need help with. And then share your wish list.

It might be respite care, you know, where someone gives you some time off. Or maybe you're craving a massage or need a haircut. Put that on the list! Maybe you need some chores done around the house that you just haven't been able to get to. Some people may be more willing to help with those "chore type of jobs" versus providing hands-on care for the person with limitations. Again, it's really important to think about the ways you can receive care for yourself and your home as well as for the person receiving care.

Leeza: Mary Lou, I love those examples so much! As someone who's around a lot of family caregivers, I know help can be one of the hardest things to ask for, especially when it involves something for the caregiver versus the recipient. But asking for help is ultimately what allows us to take better care of ourselves and be better caregivers as a result.

Mary Lou: That's so true, Leeza. As caregivers, it can often not only be challenging to ask for help but accept it once it's offered. So, if you've extended the invitation for help, then it's important that you actually let other people help!

And another way you can help the holidays go a little smoother is to include the person you're caring for in some of the holiday traditions, if you will, like having them unpack holiday decorations, which can be a great way to trigger memories too.

Leeza: I also really like how the article from the Family Caregiver Alliance suggested reflecting on the rewards of caregiving and how that can and I quote, "help maintain your self-esteem. It may feel very rewarding, very rewarding, to know that you are fulfilling a vow or promise you have made to the person for whom you provide care. Your caregiving may be an expression of living up to your personal ideals or religious beliefs. You may also be experiencing a great deal of growth as you learn new skills and meet challenges in ways you never imagined possible.

Mary Lou: I love that suggestion too. Well caregiving can be challenging. It can also be very rewarding. I definitely know that was the case for myself and my siblings when we were caregivers for my mom.

And lastly, another suggestion from that Family Caregiver Alliance article is that you could send a thank you note to family or friends who spent time with you and your loved one over the holidays and throughout the year. Reinforcing the positive effect their visits and support had on you may encourage them to give both you and your care recipient more compassion and support in the future.

The second resource is an article from AARP called 10 Tips for Caregivers During the Holidays: Feeling Stressed? Reset Your Expectations and Enjoy the Little Moments. That was the title, kind of a long one, but it was a really great article. So, while we don't have enough time to cover all the tips featured in the article during this episode, I will share a few. The first tip is to focus on what is most meaningful. Consider what things you can control and those you can't. What holiday traditions can be prioritized to do and what can be modified or eliminated.

Leeza: That's a great reminder. It's so easy to get caught up in trying to do all the things this time of year. And sometimes, I think we lose sight of what truly matters, and that is spending time with our friends and family.

Mary Lou: Yeah, this article also talks about something we've covered in past episodes. And that's to keep things simple. Whether it's holiday activities, food, or gift-giving, it can really be helpful to simplify things around this time of the year.

Leeza: You know, I'm a big fan of simplicity Mary Lou. And yes, we have covered the benefits of keeping things simple in a past episode. Can you share some examples of how you can keep things simple this specific holiday season?

Mary Lou: Yeah, of course, you can simplify holiday activities in many ways. Instead of getting everyone bundled up to attend religious service...can the group attend the service through zoom, or you know, from the comfort of your own home. Or, when it comes to food, you can ask for help for up from others who are attending by having them bring the bulk of the meal or purchase some or all of the items pre-made. And lastly, gift-giving, you can keep it super simple by having each family group open one gift.

Leeza: I'll definitely be borrowing some of those, or some of these ideas, I should say this holiday season, especially the food one. It can be a lot to be in charge of preparing a big meal for everyone. So, delegating some of those responsibilities among family members can definitely help take some of that pressure off for the caregivers and non-caregivers alike.

Mary Lou: Yeah, for sure. And lastly, the AARP article also talks about creating an atmosphere that's more soothing than alerting. Some examples of doing this might be to have fewer decorations around your home, put on music that's more quiet versus loud. A good round of home for the holidays is A-okay, but turn the volume down, so it's in the background, and people can still hear and converse with each other. A

person with memory loss who enjoys singing may remember the words to many tunes so remember to have some fun with that one too. And in the end, it's all about the connections we make with the people in our lives.

Leeza: You're spot on, Mary Lou. While the decor, music, food, and presents are all part of the holiday season, of course. Again, it's really the time that we spend, the connections like you said, with our loved ones that make the holiday season truly special and memorable.

Mary Lou: So, if there's anything you take away from this episode, remember, you don't have to do it all this holiday season, especially if it's going to create unnecessary stress for you as a caregiver. And of course, remember to ask for help and be willing to accept it if it's offered.

Leeza: One of the ways we love to help you on your caregiver journey is by answering your questions on our show. And today, we're actually addressing two questions we received from local caregivers. Our first question is from a family caregiver who's wondering how to handle disagreements with his 89-year-old mother when she argues about something that he's already explained and then refuses to change her opinion when corrected.

Mary Lou: This is pretty common. I have to say. I've had lots of interactions with family members who have the same kind of concern. So, my recommendation is that you do not argue with her. Instead, redirect the conversation to something else, or offer a distraction. Like, boy, I think I need a good cup of coffee. Do you want one to mom? Know that you may have to explain things more than once to a person who has short-term memory is limited. So, there are a couple of ways you might want to handle this. First, breathe and remember that that person can't remember things. You might want to try writing down the answer in a place she can see so she can see it if she's still able to read. One example of this would be if she repeatedly asks what the date is. I recommend having a big calendar within view with today's date highlighted. You can point to the calendar and ask her what the date is that's circled, or you can point to a reminder sign that says we leave at 4 pm for the party.

So sometimes a person who repeats things is just bored and needs something to do, so give her something to do that will help her feel productive or that she would find fun. Some examples of this include pulling out a box of old jewelry and asking her to pair up the earrings to organize the box or bring out a bunch of socks that she can sort by color or folding laundry. There are lots and lots of activities that can be used as distractions, and we'll make sure to offer more suggestions of activities like this in future podcasts.

Leeza: Thanks, Mary Lou. Our second question has to do with in-home services. And the question is, what is the process for someone looking for help within home services for weekly service versus daily? And when's the best time to contact them?

Mary Lou: My recommendation here would be that you contact your local area agency on aging for their assistance to direct you to organizations in your own area that might offer in-home services.

As for timing, the sooner, the better always, especially with covid continuing to impact care provider availability. It's smart to get the ball rolling sooner rather than later.

Leeza: So helpful! Thank you, Mary Lou. And don't forget if you have a caregiver question you'd like us to answer during a future episode of The Northland Caregiver, you can always submit your questions to podcast@duluthagingsupport.org or call 218-576-7123 to leave any questions you have as a message on our voicemail, and we'll do our best to answer them in future episodes.

And as always, don't forget to subscribe to our podcast, The Northland Caregiver, on Spotify and Apple Podcasts or on duluthagingsupport.org/podcast.

Mary Lou: Thanks again for tuning in. And we hope you'll join us again next month as we talk more about aging in place and how to help your care recipient make their home safer and more accessible. And as always, we'll be sure to share some helpful self-care tips and answer any questions from local caregivers and the Northland just like you.

Until next time, take care!

Leeza: The Northland Caregiver podcast is brought to you by Duluth Aging Support, a nonprofit organization that helps enhance the lives of older adults and caregivers in the Northland through outreach, awareness, advocacy, and collaborative partnerships.

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