

K-State Research and Extension News for November, 2023

We SEE You

Submitted by Kathy Goul, Family & Consumer Science Agent

An estimated 53 million adults in the United States offer unpaid care to a relative or friend, and this number continues to grow as the population ages. Providing care for a loved one can be highly rewarding, but the rewards may come at a price. While many caregivers work quietly behind the scenes, their work can put a considerable strain on their own lives. The stress of caregiving can lead to physical, emotional and mental exhaustion, ultimately resulting in caregiver burnout.

Signs of caregiver burnout may include changes in sleep patterns, appetite or weight, feelings of anxiety, irritability or depression, withdrawing from friends, family and other loved ones or feelings of helplessness or hopelessness.

Having served in the role of a family caregiver on more than one occasion, I can tell you the hardest thing to do is ask others for help. We toss on Superman's cape and go forth to conquer the world on our own because, after all, everyone has a full plate. Right? The problem with this way of thinking is that it ultimately *will* lead to burnout. I have been there, and it is not a place you want to be.

Most caregivers do what they do out of a sense of duty and love, not necessarily for recognition. However, it always helps to know your efforts are not going unnoticed and you can count on loved ones for support. It helps to be SEEN, and supported, by those around you.

This November, during National Family Caregiver's Month, I encourage you to reach out to a family caregiver. Let him or her know you SEE them and appreciate the work they are doing to care for their friend or loved one. A small, meaningful gesture, can go a long way to lift someone's spirits and provide some stress relief.

Be a sounding board. Put aside the natural tendency to be a problem solver and just sit back and listen. Providing the opportunity for the caregiver to unburden and get feelings and frustrations out in the open can be very rejuvenating.

Check in with a thoughtful text message, email or telephone call. Put together a care package or send a bouquet of flowers "just because". Offer to help with errands or pick a day of the week to drop off a meal and/or help with household chores. Provide a much-needed break by sitting with their loved one for an hour or the entire afternoon.

The key is to fit in as seamlessly as possible so it's not another thing caregivers have to worry about coordinating. Be flexible if plans change at the last minute for an emergency. Let them know you understand and are happy to reschedule at their convenience.

For those of you currently serving as a caregiver, I encourage you to be open and willing to receive help when it is offered. Have a list of specific ways in which friends and loved ones can help when they ask. Do not be afraid to remove Superman's cape. Last time I checked, there were a lot of super heroes out there willing to help! Allow yourself to be SEEN and appreciated for all you do. YOU make a difference. YOU matter.

For more information on aging well, contact Kathy Goul at 913-294-4306 or by email at kgoul@ksu.edu.