November Is National Family Caregivers Month

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This special observance enables us to do the following:

- Raise awareness of family caregiver issues
- Celebrate the efforts of family caregivers
- Educate family caregivers about self-identification
- Increase support for family caregivers

“Caregiving can be a 24-hours-a-day, seven-days-a-week job,” states the Caregiver Action Network, which spearheads National Family Caregivers Month. “Providing care around the clock can crowd out other important areas of life.”

What challenges do family caregivers face, and how do they manage them day and night?

**Morning:** The average family caregiver is a working mother of school-aged children. Mornings become a tricky balancing act of getting the kids ready for school, making sure your loved one has what they need for the day, and then getting yourself out the door for work.

**Throughout the Day:** Up to 70 percent of the time, the family caregiver manages the medications. The more serious the condition, the more likely it is that the family caregiver manages the medications for the patient. This means ensuring their loved one is taking medication correctly and maintaining an up-to-date medication list.

**During the Workday:** Six out of 10 family caregivers work full or part time in addition to juggling their caregiving responsibilities at home. Most say they have to cut back on working hours, take a leave of absence, or quit their job entirely.

**Evening:** Evenings are for family time and mealtime. Nutrition is as important for caregivers as it is for their loved ones. Proper nutrition helps maintain strength, energy, stamina and a positive attitude.

**Late at Night:** This might be the only time that family caregivers get a few minutes for themselves to rest and recharge. The chance to take a breather and re-energize is vital so they can be as good a caregiver tomorrow as they were today.

**Middle of the Night:** If loved ones may need to go to the emergency room in the middle of the night on occasion, family caregivers should be prepared ahead of time with what they need to know and what they need to have with them.
Be Grateful and Be Happier

Building your gratitude muscle can have physical and emotional benefits
by Laura Lynn Brown

I was going through a rough patch and calling my lifelines. My friend Peggy listened, sympathized, then gave me an order: start keeping a gratitude journal. Five things, every day.

I didn’t that day, but her insistence stayed with me. One night at bedtime, I opened a little journal I’d bought on sale and started.

1. A fairly decent night’s sleep
2. Seeing Ratatouille with my family
3. Making dinner from what we had in the house
4. Talking to Dad and making him laugh
5. Clean sheets

It’s a fitting coincidence that the first entry mentions the previous night’s sleep and anticipates the coming night’s, because studies show that better sleep is one of many benefits of practicing gratitude.

More Gratitude = Better Sleep

“If you want to sleep more soundly, count blessings, not sheep,” writes Robert Emmons, a gratitude researcher at the University of California at Davis, in his book Thanks! How Practicing Gratitude Can Make You Happier.

In a 2003 study, Emmons and colleague Michael McCullough of the University of Miami observed that those who wrote five things before bedtime once a week experienced sounder sleep, exercised more, felt more optimistic about the coming week and even made more progress on important personal goals.

“Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all the others,” Roman statesman Cicero observed. One study, by researchers Alex M. Wood, Jeffrey J. Froh and Adam W.A. Geraghty, broadened that definition after reading what people actually wrote in their gratitude journals.

Gratitude also encompasses awe (such as seeing a sunrise); abundance (a stocked pantry, having all the children home for a holiday); appreciation for the present moment (a good cup of coffee, a lunch date, clean sheets); a sense of good fortune (it could be worse) and more.
5 Ways to Build Your Gratitude Muscle

There are many ways to develop and build the gratitude muscle. Here are five:

1. **Keep a daily gratitude journal**
   All it takes is a notebook, a pen or pencil, and a few moments to reflect back over the day and think about what moments stood out. Keeping the journal in one place (like a nightstand) and connecting it with another daily habit (like getting into bed) will help to establish a routine.

   There are general categories we might be thankful for any day: family, good health, a job, a cozy home, friends. Examining the events of each individual day brings attentiveness, noticing the little things that make each day unlike any before or to come.

   A gratitude journal is personal, but it doesn’t have to be. Last summer I started sharing mine on Facebook and asking others, “How was your day?” or “What were you thankful for/glad about today?” Responses are sometimes serious, sometimes playful, often surprising.

   One caveat: publicizing changes things. The things you write in a personal gratitude journal might be too, well, personal for a public list. But a public list is a great way to play with the form, such as a list of things beginning with the same letter, or a list based on the senses — a smell, a taste, a touch, a sound, a sight.

2. **Send someone a free gratitude gram**
   The increasing popularity of gratitude is driving new, creative and communal ways to express it. Whether you’re ready to commit to a gratitude journal or not, you can give that muscle a little flex — and maybe make someone’s day — by visiting Gratitudegrams™. The small and simple pocket-size cards can be purchased in packages of 25 or 50 (price range from $11 to $18) and distributed to whomever you want to express gratitude. A side benefit: some studies have shown that those who practice gratitude also become more generous.

3. **Say thank you to people in daily life**
   It’s easy to say “thanks” to the clerk handing you coffee through the drive-through window, the kid bagging your groceries or someone holding a door open for you.

   It’s almost as easy to say “thank you” to other folks for the specific things they do; it just takes a little more imagination. Thanking a spouse for buttering the bread all the way out to the corners. Thanking a co-worker for asking you to take another crack at something instead of changing it herself. Thanking a child for his help in folding the towels. When I go to a movie on Christmas day, I thank the concession-stand workers and ticket takers for working on a holiday.
4. Be grateful for the hard stuff, too

Three years ago, I was driving home from work when a driver in a large pickup ran a red light, right into my car. It spun me sideways and my brakes failed, so I did an impromptu tour of a pedestrian mall (thankfully, it was after 10 at night, so there were no pedestrians) before I came to a stop. The car was drivable, but needed work. I was ambulatory, but needed a little bit of work, too. In the following months — getting my car taken care of, getting myself to the physical therapist and still working 40 hours a week — I saw that I could fit more than I’d thought into the time I had.

When an opportunity came along to write a book on a tight deadline, I was able to say “yes” and to deliver, partly because of the discipline of time management that came from the accident.

The lost job that led to something better, the dish we wouldn’t have discovered if the restaurant wasn’t out of what we wanted, the wrong turn that led to a scenic overlook — they can all be occasions for gratitude, even though sometimes we don’t see it until months or years later.

It’s more of a workout, like a brisk pace on an inclined treadmill, to be grateful for the hard stuff that doesn’t have a happy ending. It’s a strong muscle indeed that can be grateful for being humbled, for someone else getting something we wanted, for corrections to our course.

5. Write a letter to someone who has helped you

Mentors are an obvious choice, whether it’s someone who’s given us a recent career boost or the teacher who helped us love books by reading to us after lunch in fifth grade. Maybe it’s the cheerfulness and amazing memory of the worker at the doughnut shop.

Write a letter telling that person, in detail, what you are thankful for. If you’re able (geographically and emotionally), deliver it and read it aloud. It will make their day, and probably make yours, too.

It’s been 7 1/2 years since I first took Peggy’s advice. I’m in my ninth gratitude journal now. Yesterday:
1. Walkie-talkieing (with Voxer) all the way to Canada
2. The deepened joy apparent in a new mom’s face
3. Finding that missing little black T-shirt
4. Sounds that signal readiness (the final sigh of the coffeepot, the ejector button of the toaster)
5. Knowing a factoid that affirmed an editing decision

Gratitude is a muscle that, it turns out, likes to be exercised.

Peggy was right. It’s habit-forming. In the very best ways.
How to Release Yourself From Regrets

5 ways to avoid getting mired in could've, should've, would've thinking

By Lisa Fields

Do you spend too much time wondering what could have been, if only you’d made other choices or taken another path earlier in life? Many of us have lingering regrets about ways that we could have lived our lives differently. Research shows that as we get older, our regrets tend to focus on missed opportunities: Jobs we didn’t take, relationships that might have worked out if we'd been more attentive or understanding, experiences we were too timid to try.

“When people look back at their lives, it is often things they did not do that stand out in their regrets,” says regrets researcher Marcel Zeelenberg, professor of social psychology at Tilburg University in the Netherlands.

“Regrets over inaction often take some time to develop. One may regret not buying certain stocks that have gone up in time and thus missed the opportunity to become richer, but this regret only comes into existence after having learned about the stock going up, not directly after not buying them. Also, the not buying them is often not a very conscious thing. The things we did not do, we often did not do for many years,” he explains.

Short-term vs. Long-term Regret

Some research shows that there are benefits to experiencing short-term regret, because it may help you solidify your opinions and emotions, which may help you choose another option the next time you need to make a similar decision.

“Short-term regret is a great motivator to do it differently next time,” says Rabbi Sherre Hirsch, author of Thresholds: How to Thrive Through Life’s Transitions To Live Fearlessly and Regret-Free and chief innovation officer for American Jewish University in Los Angeles. “When we say something nasty to another human being and right away, we feel, ‘This is not good,’ it’s a motivator to change our behavior.”
If you can change opinions about situations which you regret, you may be able to detach from those negative feelings.

But after time passes, being saddled with long-term feelings of regret may be harmful to your mental and physical health, according to research. If you're 55 and still kicking yourself for a bad career move at 25, there's no going back to change things, and your negative self-talk may lower your quality of life.

“Ruminating over regrets is precisely why they are detrimental for older people and helpful for younger people, as typically, younger people have more opportunities to learn from their mistakes,” Zeelenberg says. “Why it is hard to let go of regrets when we are older is still a puzzle. I think that the emotional system simply continues to work the same when we get older, and the regrets keep nagging, but we have less opportunity to do something with it. So the same thing that is functional and leads to improvement in younger age leads to frustration and reduced well-being in older age.”

Change Your Reactions to Regret: 5 Strategies

It’s possible to consciously change the way you react to feelings of regret, which may help you lead a happier existence. Try these five strategies:

1. Live life looking forward
When you worry that your best years are behind you, you may focus on regrets because you pause more to take stock of your life. Instead, realize that the present and future are still yours for the taking.

“I help people see this is not the end, even though it feels like a shorter time in front of you,” Hirsch says. “[But you need] to realize that this moment is about living forward and that we can’t live in reverse.”

2. Be forgiving of yourself
We’re often more understanding of friends than we are of ourselves. If your friend told you about a situation from her past that she regretted, you’d probably advise her to let go of the negative feelings. Yet many people don’t tell this to themselves.

“To reduce feelings of regret and associated problems with mental and physical health, it can be useful to recognize what you could not control, which should reduce the self-blame. Learn to forgive yourself for what you could control [and] focus on the positives in the present and the future, instead of dwelling on things that have happened in the past and can no longer be changed,” says regrets researcher Wändi Bruine de Bruin, professor of behavioral decision-making at Leeds University Business School in England.
3. **Take things into perspective**
Some people regret things as older adults that weren’t possible to achieve when they were younger. Recognizing that you had limitations and that certain goals simply weren’t attainable may help you let go of certain regrets.

“People that now regret that they did not have a certain education when they were young often forget that this was not a real option when they were young,” Zeelenberg says. “For example, they did not have the money or time back then, or they needed to have a job to earn a living. [But] thinking about all the factors that played a role back then may make the current regrets less intense.”

4. **View the past differently**
If you can change your opinions about situations which you regret, you may be able to detach from those negative feelings.

“Most of us, in our minds, are very binary, black-and-white: ‘The marriage was terrible; the kids are great,’” Hirsch says. “We live much more gray. The marriage wasn’t terrible 24/7 every single minute of every single day… I tell people to remove labels as much as possible. It just is. The marriage was. It was for a certain amount of time. When I work with people, I say, ‘Just the facts. Let the feelings separate from the facts.’”

5. **Seek professional help**
Sometimes, it can be difficult to let go of regrets without help from a counselor or therapist.

“If people find this hard to do on their own, they might seek cognitive behavioral therapy, which is designed to help reduce unproductive thoughts that do nothing for us other than make us feel bad,” Bruine de Bruin says. “[It can] encourage people to recognize their unproductive thoughts and systematically question them.”

Lisa Fields is a writer who covers psychology and health matters as they relate to the workplace. She publishes frequently in WebMD and Reader’s Digest.
“Make yourself useful,” my dad used to say to me when I was seven, standing around, twisting my arms into skinny pretzels while he washed our family station wagon. The suds splashed around the blue plastic bucket, his strong forearms scrubbing the baby blue front fenders. The sun shone later as every inch of the car gleamed.

His work was meticulous and efficient. Whether washing the car or trimming the front hedge that lined our house or folding the newspaper after he read it, he was “useful.” In his presence, I always felt the need to “do something.” Sitting idly by didn't seem to work in his world. He was a busy man, a stoic provider for a family of seven children and my mother. He worked and expected the world to give him nothing in return. It was how he operated.

"When people decide to try new things, suddenly they are entering unknown (and potentially very rewarding) territory."
When my father was forced to retire due to flagging health at 78, he found himself unmoored. He had started and ran his own business, a driving force for years. His whole identity was swaddled around his “purpose” of being Mr. Music (his customers affectionately gave him the moniker which was also the name of his business, a home hi-fidelity/record & tape store which still operates today). What happened in the months that followed his retirement was watching a man roam around restless as a caged cat. He had no idea what to do with himself, how to “make himself useful.”

And then he found writing.

He found a way to self-propel into a world of meaning by writing, at his own direction, his life stories — through essays and poems and stories. He became consumed by it at times and all of us, his children, stood back in amazement that our father, whom we’d always known to be a savvy business owner, a smart cookie, an ace at poker and pool and golf, suddenly also was a damn good writer.

He penned, literally, his life in words. He had voice, authority and suddenly, a “repurpose.” It brought him joy and safety in a new world of aging that he had to traverse.

Purpose Can Be Defined in Many Ways

Studies now show that having a purpose in life is not just enjoyable, it can make us healthier and more resilient, even affecting our very mortality. Researchers at the University of Michigan’s Department of Public Health found strong evidence that associates life purpose and mortality based on data from the U.S. Health and Retirement Study (HRS). HRS participants 50 and older with the lowest life purpose had a 2.4-fold increased risk of death compared to those with the highest life purpose.

The good news is that purpose can be defined in many ways.

Some people find purpose in their jobs, raising children, all kinds of hobbies and passions — from quilting to painting to playing music to being of service to others as volunteers. For my father, writing saved him from the dark tunnel of purposelessness and brought him out into the light.

As people move into their later years, there might be a temptation just to let go of the passions they’d once held dear. Perhaps they feel they no longer are “able” to do the things that brought them joy. Sometimes physical limitations do prevent that. My dad’s macular degeneration and progressive COPD eventually put a stop to his golfing and later driving a car altogether. With that went his independence, a huge loss. Writing became his way of keeping his mind churning, his autonomy intact and his voice heard — his saving grace in so many ways.
The Benefits of Curiosity

As I watch older adults challenge themselves through writing, one thing strikes me: curiosity remains.

Just as children are curious moving within their world, that same human quality can serve us in our older years, too. When people decide to try new things, suddenly they are entering unknown (and potentially very rewarding) territory.

Take, for example, the retired school teacher who continues to volunteer at a nearby elementary school to help children learn to read. Or the unretired blacksmith artist who continues the rigorous work he has done all his life, creating incredible art and utilitarian pieces for others because he can’t imagine his world without a purposeful way to create something useful. Or the grandparents who have the pure joy of being able to help their children and forge close ties with their grandchildren. Both generations benefit because a choice was made to “continue.”

As we look toward our “golden” years, it’s actually very possible that they can become just that. Rather than grieve what we’re losing, we can open ourselves up to trying new things, especially those endeavors we seemed to never have enough time to do when we were busy being promoted in our jobs, raising children or running our households.

And to know that creating and living with purpose will benefit us just as much as physical exercise, challenge our brains and stimulate our thinking...what is there to lose?

Get busy. Make yourself useful.

Angela Burton is the Founder & Chief Writing Motivator of Feet to the Fire Writers’ Workshops®, a creative program that inspires adults to challenge themselves through expressive writing. Her particular brand of helping people find their voice and write authentic stories earned her a spot in Louisville’s WILD Accelerator for Female Founders program; Feet to the Fire Writers’ Workshops® launched nationally in 2018. Burton holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Vermont College of Fine Arts and a B.A. in English from the University of Louisville.
Caregiver Support Group

The Caregiver Support Group meets the second Wednesday of every month and offers a safe place to discuss the stresses, challenges, and rewards of providing care for a loved one.

Feel free to bring your lunch and share your experience, advice, and support to other caregivers.

November 13
12-1 PM
Godchaux Nursing Annex
Room 160
The Vanderbilt Child & Family Center
cordially invites you to our
Caregiver Appreciation Celebration
Wednesday, December 4, 2019
12:00-1:00 PM
The Living Room,
Godchaux Nursing Annex.

Refreshments provided.

Contact toya.y.cobb@vanderbilt.edu for more information