

THE MESSENGER

From RIVERBEND SENIOR LIVING and WILLOW RIDGE HEALTHCARE



November/December 2018

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Great Gifts for Skilled Nursing Residents

For many, giving is the true joy of the holiday. For a loved one living in a skilled living facility, it can be a challenge finding the perfect gift. Limited living space places a limit on what's appropriate and many residents of a nursing home already have many of their day-to-day needs met. But, with a little thought and consideration, finding the right gift can be a joyful experience. Here are some ideas for the loved one in your life.

A CD with their favorite music or a preloaded iPod.

Music has the power to stimulate emotions, enhance one's mood and soothe. Giving your loved one a CD or iPod with their favorite tunes can be a perfect gift.

Framed pictures of special memories.

Find a photo of you with your loved one when you were celebrating a wedding or birthday, or when you were vacationing together. This will serve as a reminder to them that they are special to you. It will also provide a constant mood boost.

Board games. If you visit your loved one regularly, board games can be a great way to spend time together. They also help engage your loved one's mind, which may help keep their brain healthy and active.

Lap desk with book holder. For those who have to spend a good part of the day in bed, a lap desk with a book holder makes it easy to write, surf the internet, or read a good book. It also provides easy access to things like water, books and magazines, or the television remote.

Clothing/blankets. A warm cardigan sweater, a hand-knit blanket, a sweatsuit or some non-skid slippers

will provide comfort, while making your loved feel stylish, as well! Remember that the best choices should be comfortable, loose fitting, and easy to put on, with no difficult fastenings.

Homemade treats. Homemade cookies, candies and cakes can make the holidays special, particularly if it's something that's part of a family tradition. Be sure and check with your loved one's doctor and facility staff first.

Grandkids' arts and crafts. A mug made from clay, a crayon picture or even a poem from a grandchild is always a sweet idea. These creations not only provide a constant reminder that someone loves them, but also

provide a good conversation starter with friends that visit.

Phone cards. If most of the time spent with your loved one is over the phone, get them a prepaid phone card, so they can call you whenever they like. This lets them know your connection with them is important and provides some peace of mind that they can always reach you.

Still brainstorming about the perfect gift?

Consult with the staff at the facility to see if they have any suggestions. As people who interact with your loved one on a daily basis, they may know some secret desire your loved one possesses.

Remember, the best gift, of course, is a visit from you. Enjoy the season!

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Aging & Caregiving in the News

Information, updates from across the country and around the world.

In this issue:

- A fractured bone can weaken all our bones
- More proof your smartphone can keep you up at night
- Does Medicare waste money on people at the end of life?



Weak Bones Lead to Fractures—And Maybe the Reverse Is Also True

Here's another reason to protect against falls and car accidents: Seniors with certain risk factors—such as vision loss, osteoporosis, arthritis and balance problems—are more likely to fracture a bone. But could a fracture itself raise the risk of another broken bone? “We know one fracture seems to lead to others, but we haven't known why,” said University of California Davis professor Blaine Christiansen. He and his research team found that, for older adults, fracturing a bone causes weaker bones—not just near the fracture, but throughout the body!

Christiansen and his team compared 20 years of bone mineral density tests of 4,000 older women, and noted that when a participant broke a bone, they experienced more rapid bone loss over the next couple of years. Mouse studies confirmed this effect. “Our work is the first step on the path to identifying the cellular mechanisms of systemic bone loss,” said Christiansen. He hopes these findings will lead to improved treatments for osteoporosis.

Want a Good Night's Sleep? Banish These Devices!

A number of studies have shown that taking our smartphones, tablets, laptops and other light-emitting devices to bed with us, or even using them in the hours before we turn in, can have a bad effect on our sleep quality. A recent study by a neuroscientist from Harvard Medical School confirmed that the use of these devices suppresses our body's secretion of melatonin, the hormone that regulates sleep and wakefulness. Because the volunteers in the study weren't sleepy, they delayed going to sleep. And they were groggy in the morning. “These findings provide more evidence that light-emitting electronic devices have biological effects,” said study author Dr. Jeanne Duffy. “Using light-emitting electronic devices in the late evening can postpone our decision to go to sleep, and make us more sleepy the next morning.”

How about watching TV? Other studies have shown that even though we might drift off on the couch in front of the TV, staring into the TV right at bedtime can leave us more wakeful. Read a book instead or listen to soothing music.

Is End-of-Life Spending Really “Wasteful”?

It's a story often told by the media: A patient whose chances for survival are hopeless is put on life support at a huge cost to the health care system. It's true that 25% of Medicare spending goes to the care of patients in the last year of their life. But, says a new report published in the journal *Science*, the belief that this is “wasted” money is based on an incorrect understanding of the data.

In fact, say the study authors, “There is very little Medicare spending on patients whose death within the year is highly likely.” Often, doctors are unable to predict whether a patient will survive. Patients in the last year of life are often very sick, with corresponding health care costs. But sometimes treatment works, and patients live. Said MIT economist Amy Finkelstein, “I do hope we stop pointing to end-of-life spending as an obvious problem. That's not to say there aren't problems in the U.S. health care system, but this is not a symptom of them.”

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When Caregiving Siblings Squabble

Here's a family caregiver pet peeve: A sibling comes in from out of town and criticizes the care the local sibling provides. That's just one of the pitfalls brothers and sisters might encounter as the family gathers for the holidays! Holiday visits are the time when many families get together—and therefore are also the time when disagreements about the care of elder loved ones can come to the forefront.

Today we have a “caregiver crunch.” Smaller families mean there are fewer adult children available to provide care as parents age. There were plenty of baby boomers to care for their parents—but the boomers themselves had fewer kids. Now, there are many only-child caregivers struggling to care for parents, grandparents and even great-grandparents.

These singleton caregivers often wish they had brothers and sisters to share the load—yet sibling caregivers face challenges of their own. In a University of Pennsylvania study of family caregivers, many reported that dealing with their loved one's health conditions was less stressful than conflict with their sibling over their loved one's care!

Siblings might disagree about where their parent should live, and the level of care they need. Mom has early-stage Alzheimer's—how independently can she live? Should Dad still be driving? If not, how will he get to church? Is his home too much for him? Should he move to an assisted living community, or would in-home care be better? Who will take off work to go with Grandma to doctor appointments? End-of-life decisions can be especially fraught, especially if a parent can no longer express their wishes and left no advance directive.

If you and your siblings are having a rocky time of it, here are some ways to keep the peace while providing the best, most appropriate care for your parents:

Call a family meeting. Do it sooner rather than later. Even if Mom and Dad are hale and hearty during this year's holiday gathering, carve out some time to talk about the future while everyone's together. If the folks already need care, or there are signs that they soon will, don't sweep the subject under the rug. It's time to make a plan! Be sure to

include your parents in the conversation every step of the way—leaving them out can be a recipe for failed cooperation. Get follow-up conversations on the calendar.

If one sibling has provided the lion's share of care, acknowledge their role, and listen. Quite often, a sibling who lives near an elderly parent ends up as the point person. Maybe their parent even lives with them. Over time, this sibling's duties have likely expanded along with the elder parent's needs. Primary caregivers grit their teeth when another sibling flies in from out of town, only to criticize. The less-involved sib may mean well, but may not have all the information. Don't be a “caresplainer.” Instead, offer to help.

Share the load. During the meeting, create a list of tasks that need to be done. Put it in writing. How much time, money and effort will be involved? Who will do what? It may be impractical for siblings who live at a distance to be in charge of day-to-day tasks, such as taking Mom to the doctor or helping Dad shave. But they can do other things—paperwork, help locate support resources, help pay for the cost of care, visit the folks more often, or have the folks visit them to provide respite time for the



sibling who's on the scene.

Don't let old family dynamics derail you. This is a time when resentments from yesteryear can bubble to the surface. “Mom loved you best.” “My brother could do no wrong.” “Mom ignores my kids when my sister's family is in town.” Yes, some families are close and supportive—while others have the family dynamics of a soap opera. Especially if you have been estranged or distant from a sibling, agree to put “old business” aside and focus on creating a workable plan.

Talk about money. Recent estimates are that primary family caregivers spend an average of \$7,000 each year on their loved one's care. In addition, their careers often suffer, and they jeopardize their own retirement savings. Siblings should work together to divide costs equitably, and also to understand the degree to which parents can pay for their own care.

Bring in experts. If tensions are high and the decision-making process has deteriorated into disagreements and

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Caregiving Siblings *from page 3*

stonewalling, it's time for some professional guidance. Elder law attorneys, counselors and financial planners can help. Many families today engage the assistance of a geriatric care manager (also known as an Aging Life Care Professional). These knowledgeable experts can locate local resources and also provide elder mediation services to help family members reach an agreement.

In her book *They're Your Parents Too: How Siblings Can Survive Their Parents' Aging Without Driving Each Other Crazy*, author Francine Russo refers to this stage as “the twilight of the family.” The way that siblings navigate this period together will help determine the nature of their relationship going forth—even whether they will continue to have one.

A word about stepfamilies

The steep rise in the divorce rate over the past few decades—and an accompanying increase in remarriage—means that today, there are more blended families. Maybe it's a “yours, mine and ours” situation, where the family blended early on and all the siblings feel like a family. Or maybe the family never really blended, and there are plenty of old resentments and estrangements. If senior parents married later in life, stepsiblings might have met briefly at their parents' wedding, only to have little contact going forth until a crisis brings them together again. Providing care, already an emotionally fraught situation, can quickly create friction and disagreement. The two sets of adult children may have vastly different ideas and priorities. Calling in an expert can be especially important in this situation.

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