



## Four Great Things You Can Do While Someone You Love Is in a Skilled Nursing Facility

The call came in the middle of the day. “Your father suffered a stroke,” the hospital chaplain told Michelle. “You need to come, right away.” The next few days were a blur of CAT scans, blood tests, balance tests, and other screenings to determine when and where to discharge her Dad.

Luckily for Michelle, the hospital social worker recognized her needs as well. A united front with the admissions and activities directors at the skilled nursing facility helped ease this transition for both father and daughter.

### 1. Show love by showing up... and having FUN.

The facility’s clinical staff are experts at ensuring essential medical care and physical therapy to help patients recover their physical health. With that in mind, you have an essential role to play by helping your loved one find joy and comfort in the moment. In this case, the staff created an individualized daily rehabilitation schedule and shared it with Michelle. That way, she knew when it was a good time to stop by for a meal, enjoy social activities, or just to sit quietly with her father after physical therapy sessions when he really appreciated an encouraging presence.

### 2. Apply these same principles to yourself.

The same is true for you. Love yourself and find time for things you would find so much fun that you lose track of time. Many family caregivers are sandwiched between caring for a sick or aging parent while also caring for their own family. In Michelle’s case, she was also raising young teens and managing her household, as well as a full-time career. It’s at these times, when caregiving seems



to overwhelm you, that you must make time to care for yourself. Make it an item on your “to-do” list: Dedicate time to self-care as you would to preparing a report or having a meeting with your child’s teacher.

“One of the things on my ‘favorites’ list, as I called it, was a ten-minute exercise routine each morning while coffee brewed,” Michelle recalls. “I couldn’t always go for a massage or facial, of course. But I could take a few minutes, each day, to focus on my breath.”

Caring for yourself will help you achieve a sense of equilibrium and control during what is an undeniably very busy time, especially for those family member caregivers juggling multiple priorities and life roles.

### 3. Ask for help.

As you seek balance in caring for others as well as yourself, there are things you must do, but other tasks can be outsourced.

“It was during this time I learned to ask myself, ‘what’s

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# Solving the Mysteries of Sleep

Does this couple need a marriage counselor — or a sleep specialist?



Sleep was once considered a rather mysterious phenomenon. We knew we wanted to do it, but we weren't sure why! People often tried to cut back on sleep, thinking they were being industrious and virtuous — yet, it turns out that good sleep is vital for good health. Sleep lowers our pain level, helps us maintain a healthy weight, and helps us avoid or manage so many health conditions, from diabetes to heart disease to depression.

Fortunately, researchers today have sophisticated technologies at their disposal with which to learn more about sleep, that portion of each 24 hours during which we might appear to be doing nothing — but in fact, during which our brains and bodies are doing quite a bit!

What's new in our understanding of sleep and aging? Let's take a look at some interesting recent findings.

## While we slumber, our brains aren't slacking.

New studies confirm that it is during sleep that our brains consolidate memories. A good night's sleep is a better way to perform well on a test than cramming all night, experts say. Scientists have also found that it is only during sleep that the brain's natural cleaning system can remove waste. University of Copenhagen expert Dr. Maiken Nedergaard uses this analogy: "There is probably a good reason why we do not clean the brain while awake — how could the nerve cells work in a dishwasher?"

New understanding of the relationship between sleep problems and dementia. A study from University of California, Berkeley found that changes in the brain caused by dementia can have a negative effect on our sleep, and poor sleep might even be considered a diagnostic sign. The opposite also is true, they found: People whose sleep quality declined between their 50s and 60s had a greater risk of later developing Alzheimer's disease. The researchers urge people to seek treatment right away for sleep disorders, and to practice good sleep habits — for example, getting enough sleep, creating a quiet, dark sleep environment, and avoiding the use of light-emitting devices such as smartphones in the evening.

## Sleep problems come with a hefty price tag.

Research from University of Michigan Medicine found that 56% of people older than 65 are dealing with obstructive sleep apnea, which they define as "a sleep disorder in which the throat collapses during sleep, causing the patient to repeatedly stop breathing for periods of 10 seconds or longer throughout the night." Yet only 8% of these seniors have ever been evaluated or treated. This could be pricey: Another study, this one from the University of Maryland School of Medicine, showed that if seniors with sleep apnea are treated for the condition, their Medicare costs are on average \$20,000 less per year than those who are not treated.

## Sleep problems can hurt your marriage!

A study from the Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center revealed that when spouses don't get a good night's sleep, they are liable to have more arguments, and to be more hostile to one another during those tiffs. The team says sometimes this is because one partner is having trouble sleeping, and then keeps the other one awake! "Part of the issue in a marriage is that sleep patterns often track together. If one person is restless, or has chronic problems, that can impact the other's sleep.

If these problems persist over time, you can get this nasty reverberation within the couple,” noted study author Janice Kiecoll-Glaser. So don’t just get help for snoring, sleep apnea or other problems for your own health. Do it for the health of your relationship, as well!

### Do you need a sleeping pill, or a walk in the park?

A University of Illinois study found that seniors who have access to nature report better quality sleep. In part, the experts speculate, this is because we tend to get more physical activity when we’re in natural surroundings. But that doesn’t explain the entire effect. The team thinks spending time in nature helps regulate our circadian rhythm, also known as our sleep/wake cycle — our internal clock that urges our bodies to shut down for the night and come back to alertness in the morning. Said study author Prof. Diana Grigsby-Toussaint, who is now at Brown University, “If there is a way for persons over 65 to spend time in nature, it would improve the quality of their sleep — and their quality of life — if they did so.”

### What’s up with coffee and sleep?

We’ve long known that coffee can perk us up in the morning — but, if we have that cup of joe in the evening, we’re liable to toss and turn. A research team from University of Colorado Boulder explains why. The caffeine in coffee, which the study authors call “the most widely used psychoactive drug in the world,” affects the hormones that regulate our circadian rhythms, causing a delay in the time our bodies power down by about 40 minutes. The effect even shows up in primitive creatures like algae and fruit flies, they report!

Studies continue to confirm that while older adults may have trouble getting to sleep and falling asleep, this isn’t “just a part of getting older.” Our sleep patterns often

do change as we grow older — for example, we tend to go to sleep earlier and then wake up earlier in the morning. But more troublesome sleep problems might be caused by pain, anxiety, the medications we take, and inactivity. Ask your doctor for an evaluation. You might be referred to a sleep specialist. These experts offer many therapies to improve our sleep. It’s well worth the effort. Sweet dreams!

## The Positive Side of Gossip



There’s a classic southernism: “Bless her heart.” It’s usually said after one person makes a critical observation about another, yet — however catty the comment — it usually conveys a sense of concern and affection.

Stacey Torres, a University of California San Francisco School of Nursing professor, recently studied a group of older adults over the course of five years, analyzing their conversations and the role of gossip among them. Her study, published in the *Journals of Gerontology*, found that gossip helps seniors stay connected with others. Said Torres, “I identify three main ways gossip helped participants avoid isolation: gossip as a means of setting group limits and establishing the boundaries of acceptable behavior; as entertainment and activity; and as information sharing.” She noted that most of these discussions contained genuine concern. So, while it’s good to avoid mean-spirited chatter about others, it might be that “if you can’t say something nice, don’t say anything at all” isn’t entirely true!

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the highest and best use of my time?” Gaining momentum, Michelle learned that time spent being present with her father as he recovered his health as well as being with her family were priceless commodities. Prioritizing her time, Michelle decided she didn’t need to do the grocery shopping or even clean the house. “I signed up for grocery delivery and divvied up the weekly chores among the kids and my husband. That way, everyone could lend a hand. The bonus was we also found more time to spend together.”

#### **4. Count your blessings.**

The end result is so well worth it. In the case of this daughter, her recovering father and her family, they learned to appreciate and savor their time spent together. She was humbled by the dedication of seeing her dad’s clinical team in action, ensuring his gradual rehabilitation.

Her family gained a greater appreciation for the enormity of what goes into making a home run smoothly for everyone. “This past Mother’s Day, I was given a spa day from my kids and husband,” she beams. “But the real gift was how close we became over coming together to help one another. It was more than bumpy at first, but I am filled with gratitude over what we accomplished.”

**Keep following these steps. Soon enough, you’ll gain helpful insights into the blessings and value found in how a skilled nursing facility helps not only the patient but also his or her family member caregivers.**