



## How to Start a Caregiver Support Ministry

### *Getting Started*

- A. Explain the need for a caregiver support ministry to your pastor and then to the church board and the entire church. Help them understand that all churches have caregivers although the kind of caregiving varies.
- B. Presenting the following objective: Increase opportunities for people to actively support caregivers in practical ways.
- C. Organize a “Ministry to the Caregivers” team composed of those who are caring people.
- D. Select a coordinator for the team.
- E. Those currently involved with caregiving may contribute to the team’s understanding of the kind of support a caregiver may need. However, because of their responsibility, a caregiver should not also be asked to provide additional support for other caregivers.
- F. Survey the church to identify practicing caregivers and family members of the one receiving care.
- G. Match compatible support persons with the caregiver.
- H. Recruit a leader who can develop a team and who will become a voting member of the church board. If possible, this person should be someone who is directly benefited by APM ministries (i.e. either has a physical or mobility challenge, is Deaf, blind, etc.).
- I. Interview local caregivers to understand their special needs.
- J. Principles to keep in mind:
  - Rule number one, the family of the caregivers should not be considered as the ones providing the special support for the caregivers.

- Listen attentively to what caregivers have to say. They rarely expect others to solve their problems, but they need to vent their frustration and sorrow from time to time. Respond during conversations with sounds or short comments to assure them that you are engaged and do care. Pretending to listen is not sufficient. A true friend will listen attentively.
- Don't second guess the person's decisions or motivations for caregiving. It is unlikely that you are aware of all the details of their situation. Criticism isn't helpful.
- A caregiver for a seriously ill loved one is often as vulnerable and emotionally drained as someone who is mourning a death. In many cases, especially for dementia caregivers, they experience [anticipatory grief](#) as they watch their care recipient decline. The one supporting the caregiver cannot be expected to know exactly what kind of assistance they need, but asking directly sounds much more sincere than the generic "Let me know if there's anything I can do." Many family caregivers do not ask for help, so take it upon yourself to broach the subject—and be sure to follow through.
- Offer the gift of your time. Family caregivers often find themselves wishing there were more hours in the day to tackle everything they need and want to do. Finding concrete ways to free up some of their time is invaluable. Help research their care recipient's condition(s) and care options. Offer to visit with them for a couple of hours so your friend can enjoy some alone time. Devote an afternoon to running errands for them. Choose one day every other week to bring dinner over. Just don't offer things you can't deliver.
- Give your friend space. Sometimes a caregiver wants nothing more than to be left alone. Don't imply that just because they aren't actively rushing around, they have nothing to do. However, be alert for [signs of caregiver burnout](#) like withdrawal, isolation, and depression. Remember to take your friend's "normal" personality into account. A typically gregarious person may need some prodding to go out, but many people need time alone to regroup and recharge before they can enjoy anything social.
- Bring food. This can be a full meal, the main dish, or a dessert. Something that can be frozen is often best. Let your friend know that this gift is intended for whenever it would best suit their schedule. That way, you are not overriding plans they may already have made. If you've been listening attentively to what is happening in their life and with their care recipient, then you will likely be aware of any dietary restrictions that are in place.
- Offer to take your friend out—and help arrange respite care. For most people, seeing a movie, grabbing lunch, and going for a walk are simple outings that require minimal planning. For a primary caregiver who lives with their care

recipient, even stepping out for 30 minutes to get groceries can feel impossible. In cases like these, a huge limiting factor is not having some sort of [backup](#) for their loved one. To increase the likelihood that they can and will join you, assure your friend that you have someone trustworthy—perhaps another friend from your group, a family member, or a professional caregiver—who can take over in their absence. Caregivers can't relax when they are worried about their loved one's welfare.

- Don't make more work for them. Avoid doing anything that adds more to a caregiver's already full plate. Be considerate and realistic when brainstorming ways of lifting their spirits. For example, saying that you are gathering the gang to come over for a visit on a whim is a no-go. No matter how often you repeat that the caregiver should not go to any trouble, they will probably still feel pressured to prepare for company. Showing up unannounced is strongly discouraged as well since caregivers are often running on a tight schedule. This advice is not meant to discourage visits and social calls. Just be sure to ask when would be convenient and give plenty of notice beforehand.
- Keep them feeling included. Don't overwhelm the caregiver with invitations that you know can't be accepted but do make sure they are still kept in the loop. Extend invitations—ideally with practical help, when needed—that can conceivably be accepted. At the same time, don't lay guilt on your friend for declining. Sometimes caregivers are simply too fatigued to want to do anything at all, but that does not mean they don't want to be remembered.
- It's the thought that counts as with nearly everything that has to do with caregiving, there is no guarantee that you, as a friend, will always do the right thing. Don't feel guilty if you've neglected your friend or done something "wrong." Just keep trying to nurture your friendship in every practical way that you can.