

Unique Resolutions for a Caregiver

By Marcy Maler, MA, Care and Education Specialist

With the New Year upon us, now is the logical time to set goals for the 365 days ahead. It's that fleeting time of year when gyms are packed to the brim and burgers are swapped for salads. As a caregiver for a person with dementia, you may be tempted to forgo the resolutions altogether this year. After all, why add more to your already substantial to-do list?



Caring for someone with dementia is a demanding role and requires a special set of New Year's resolutions. Several studies have revealed the many health risks family caregivers for a person with dementia must face—the chronic stress often caused by this role can lead to a host of health problems. The new year is a great time to establish new goals that will help you become a happier, healthier caregiver.

Now is the opportunity to take time for yourself, get the help you need, understand your emotions, and provide the best possible care for your loved one. It is *your* year. It starts now with the following New Year's resolutions.

1. This year I will take care of my own health

Family caregivers tend to be big-hearted people willing to devote themselves to ensuring a loved one's wellbeing, often at the expense of his own health. And the chronic stress experienced by many caregivers means they are also at greater risk of developing a serious illness. It won't be easy, but at some point, you need to make a realistic plan to look after your own physical and mental health. Make it happen this year with the help of a medical professional who can determine your most pressing health needs. Schedule your routine health checks right away and follow up on them as required by your doctor.

2. This year I will get more sleep

Sleep has a huge impact on overall health. Juggling myriad responsibilities, it is even tougher to get the recommended 7 to 8 hours of slumber nightly. Take small steps toward achieving that goal: set your bedtime 15 minutes earlier than usual; then add another 15 minutes earlier, and so forth until you are logging at least 7 hours of sleep. Alternatively, you can set your alarm 15 minutes later as a means to increase your sleep.

3. This year I will reach out to resources in my community

As a caregiver, you may feel guilty, resentful, burned out, and at the end of your rope. You may feel all alone. Maybe you begin to realize you can't do it all on your own; there is nothing wrong with that. This is the year to ask for help where you need it. Family members can help with errands, driving, or companionship for your loved one. They can provide respite time for you to take time for yourself and the self care you may be neglecting. Or, perhaps it is time to find responsible and trustworthy professional help to lighten your load; or you join an Alzheimer's support group where you will find others who have the same concerns. Talking about your situation will help you to clarify your thoughts and understand your feelings.

alzheimer's association®

California Central Coast Chapter

Santa Barbara County
1528 Chapala St., #204
Santa Barbara, CA 93101
Tel: 805.892.4259

120 E. Jones St, #113
Santa Maria, CA 93454
Tel: 805.636.6432

San Luis Obispo County
71 Zaca Ln Suite 110
San Luis Obispo, CA 93401
Tel: 805.547.3830

Ventura County
2580 E. Main St Suite 201
Ventura, CA 93003
Tel: 805.494.5200

24-Hour Helpline:
800.272.3900

alz.org/CaCentral



Tips & Tools

10 Symptoms of Caregiver Stress

1. Denial about the disease and the effect it may have on the person who's been diagnosed.
2. Anger at the person with dementia; anger that no cure exists or that others don't understand your dilemma.
3. Social withdrawal from friends and activities that once brought pleasure.
4. Anxiety about facing another day and about the future.
5. Depression that begins to break your spirit and affects your ability to cope.
6. Exhaustion that makes it nearly impossible to complete necessary daily tasks.
7. Sleeplessness caused by a never-ending list of concerns.
8. Irritability that leads to moodiness and triggers negative responses and actions.
9. Lack of concentration that makes it difficult to perform familiar tasks.
10. Health problems that begin to take their toll.

4. This year I will do something I enjoy

There are a lot of activities that can reduce stress, like knitting, journaling, or reading, that you can do while caregiving. However, your stress-reducing activities don't necessarily have to revolve around the caregiving aspect of your life. In fact, it is healthy to step back from caregiving and do something you really enjoy: exercise, dancing, making music, playing cards with friends, going to movies, to name a few. Carving out weekly time just for you is essential for your health and wellbeing. Choose any activity or hobby that interests you, and pursue it.

5. This year I will expand our world

If you're like many family caregivers, you are so busy taking care of your loved one's daily needs that don't realize that you no longer spend quality time together. Rather than letting the hours with your loved one get consumed by monotonous care tasks, make a point of creating fond memories with that person.

Plan an activity you will both enjoy each week. Depending on your loved one's mobility, you can incorporate outside activities like hiking (including wheelchair trails), volunteering, social gatherings, or day programs. Look over old photo albums, bake your favorite goodies, explore a local museum, eat out, or simply go on a scenic drive. By involving you both in community activities, you both battle isolation and depression. There are even support groups that you can attend together!

6. This year I will plan for future care

It's a tough pill to swallow, but there will likely come a day when you are no longer able to care for your loved one. Planning ahead and researching care options for your loved one will relieve future stress. Depending on your situation, that could mean **in-home**



care or assisted living. And while no one wants to contemplate it, it is wise to designate an alternate person to care for your loved one in your will.

7. This year I will make arrangements to include friends and family to help with care and support.

Establish weekly routines. Others can help with mowing the lawn, grocery shopping, providing rides to appointments, and preparing or delivering a meal. They can take your loved one to an outside activity, stay with her while you go out, or pick up medications.

Let them provide emotional support. Set up a weekly time to call or visit with a friend or relative. Let them know it is important to stay connected and let you express your frustrations and concerns.

Ask them to research community help.

Chances are you may not have time to research the community resources you may need. Ask your relative to help you find respite care, adult day care, transportation, a handyman to help with home improvements, and so forth.

Help with home safety. Ask for help in making your home safer for your loved one. You may need help in adapting your house for changes in mobility or balance, such as installing grab bars in the bathroom or adding more lights.

Find an exercise buddy. Regular exercise does wonders for the caregivers' stress levels. Ask a family member or friend to commit to regular walks, trips to the gym, or gardening with you. It will be good for both of you.

As we age, the years pass quickly from one to the next. Unless we are able to look back at our yearly accomplishments or the changes in our lives, we may feel as if we have made no progress or accomplished any goals. While the task of making New Year's resolutions may seem stressful to a caregiver—it is daunting to have to make yet one *more* list—consider that we have made your list here, and taking action on any one of these tips will provide infinite support to your overall wellbeing.