



Helping Caregivers

What can I do to help? This is the most common question people asked when my husband was diagnosed with a terminal illness. The answer I gave was always a lie. I was too proud, too independent to tell the truth.

Few caregivers or patients will say, "Our bathrooms smell like a latrine", or "The refrigerator could be some kid's science project", "The wash is piled to the ceiling," "The dogs have mistaken the carpet for grass," or "All that's left to eat is cereal and water".

What people need help with most are the routine, mind-numbing chores of daily life. Having a friend cook a meal is wonderful, but we eat everyday. If you want to help immeasurably, consider cooking a meal every Monday, and recruit six other friends to cook the rest of the week. Or on a lesser scale, just go to the grocery store and the drug store once a week.

Cleaning the bathrooms, doing the wash, walking the dogs, mowing the yard, going shopping, picking up prescriptions, cleaning out the refrigerator, chauffeuring the kids, mopping, vacuuming, dusting-few people want to do these tasks when they're healthy. They are done without thinking, automatically-like taking a bath or brushing teeth. So, well-meaning volunteers rarely think of these things, or they think of them only once. They are not recognized as mountains every patient and caregiver must climb or skirt daily between diagnosis and death.

Helping with brainless, unglamorous, routine chores is unlikely to get a person nominated for Volunteer of the Year. Sometimes these tasks smell; they may touch on the personal or be annoying. But when one is fighting terminal illness, pride in housekeeping and organization go out the window. Every single minute is focused on staying alive, doing what needs to be done to ensure there is another tomorrow. Friends who step in and help with the dirty work are not intruders, they are godsend.

I laughed every time I passed a Martha Stewart's "Living" magazine at the check-out line. I thought of publishing a competing magazine called "Dying". It would feature articles on how to function on two hours of sleep, how to control odors, how to make messes less obvious, and how to designate one's yard a "Natural Habitat," and, above all, how to appear cheerful, competent, and grateful when death is one's looming companion.

The bottom line is: dying is dirty business. Put on your work clothes and come help.

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