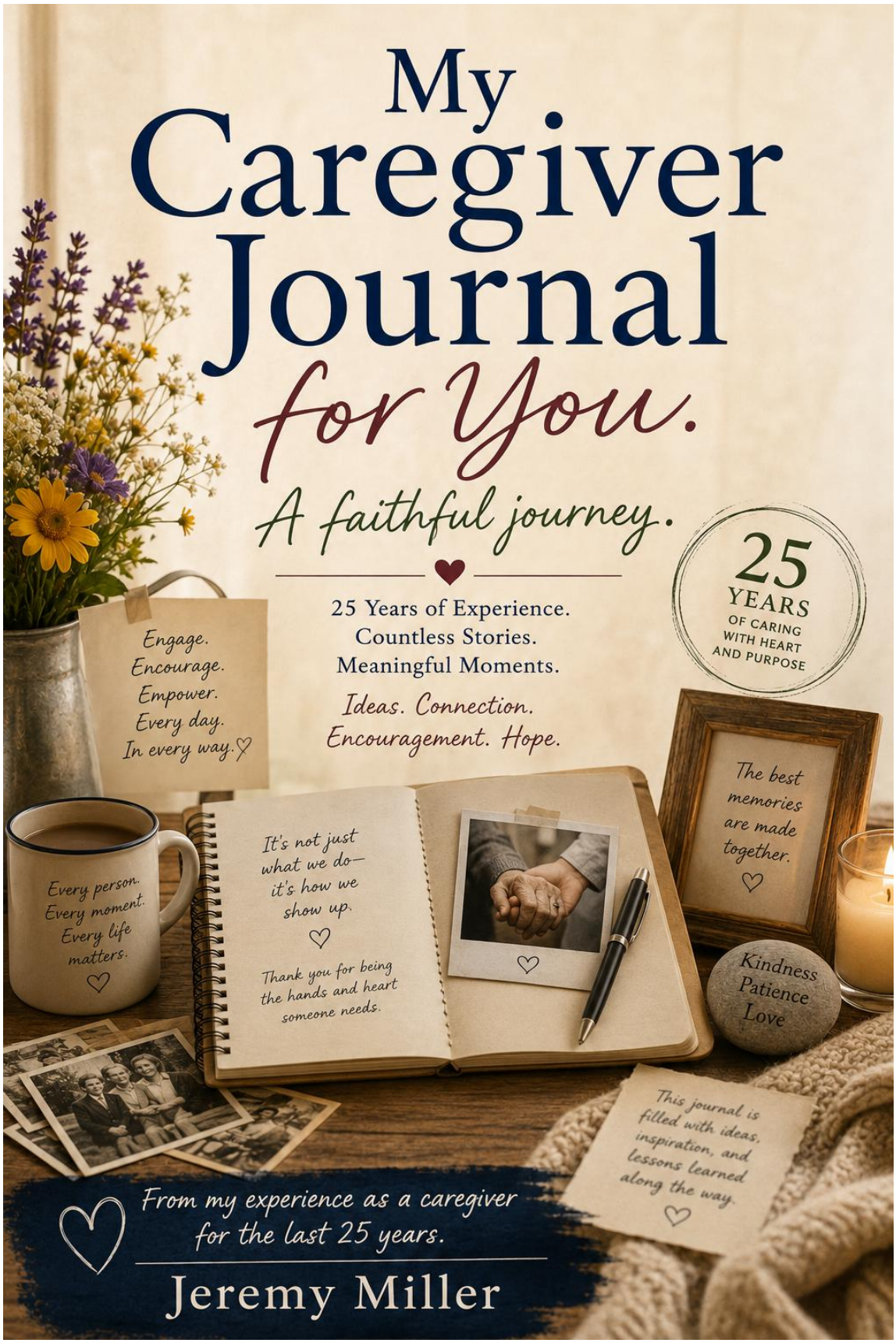
My
Caregiver
Journal
for You.
A faithful journey.
25 Years of Experience.
Countless Stories.
Meaningful Moments.
Ideas. Connection.
Encouragement. Hope.
25
YEARS
OF CARING
WITH HEART
AND PURPOSE
Engage.
Encourage.
Empower.
Every day.
In every way.
Every person.
Every moment.
Every life
matters.
It's not just
what we do—
it's how we
show up.
Thank you for being
the hands and heart
someone needs.
The best
memories
are made
together.
Kindness
Patience
Love
This journal is
filled with ideas,
inspiration, and
lessons learned
along the way.
From my experience as a caregiver
for the last 25 years.
Jeremy Miller

My Caregiver Journal For You

A Faithful Journey

Jeremy Miller

Growing up as a minister's child shaped me in ways I did not fully understand at the time. The church was more than a building. It was my second home. Its hallways, classrooms, and sanctuary were where life unfolded in honest and meaningful ways. Our congregation was made up of people from every generation, with different backgrounds, abilities, and life experiences. From an early age, I found myself surrounded by people who celebrated together, grieved together, and quietly carried one another through life's joys and hardships. Long before I understood the meaning of caregiving, I was watching it happen every week.

One of my earliest memories of caregiving did not take place in a hospital, nursing home, or doctor's office. It happened in the back of the church. Every Sunday, a small group of older women sat in the same pews near the back of the sanctuary. They were faithful, dependable, and always seemed to know exactly where they belonged. As a minister's kid, I spent much of my time wandering through the church between services, during fellowship, and sometimes when I probably should have been sitting quietly. Every time I walked past those pews, I knew exactly what was coming.

They pinched my cheeks.

Not gently, either. It was the kind of cheek pinch that made you wince for just a second before they smiled and laughed. At the time, I did not understand why they did it. I simply knew I had been noticed. I was known. I belonged.

They always asked how I was doing. They remembered my name, asked about school, and somehow always knew the latest baseball scores. We talked about my favorite teams, players, and games as though they were just as invested as I was. Looking back, I doubt they followed baseball as closely as they let on. They talked about it because they knew it mattered to me. Instead of expecting me to enter their world, they stepped into mine. They spoke my language, and in doing so, they made a young boy feel important.

Years later, I began to understand what those conversations really meant. Those women were caring for me. They never changed a bandage, passed out medication, or held an official title. Yet they offered something just as meaningful. They offered consistency, kindness, encouragement, and a place where I always felt welcome. Week after week, they reminded me that I mattered simply by taking an interest in my life. In their own quiet way, they helped raise me. They watched me grow, celebrated who I was becoming, and demonstrated that some of the greatest acts of caregiving happen through ordinary moments that many people never notice.

As a child, I probably thought of them as the church ladies who pinched my cheeks every Sunday. Today, I see them as some of my very first caregivers and mentors. Without ever

realizing it, they taught me that engagement is not about putting on a program or doing something extraordinary. It is about being present. It is about paying attention, remembering what matters to someone else, and helping them feel seen and valued. A simple conversation about baseball became a lesson in compassion because they chose to meet me where I was.

Those women shaped my life far more than they could have imagined. They planted seeds of empathy, patience, kindness, and service that would continue growing throughout my life. Looking back, I can see how those ordinary Sunday mornings quietly prepared me for a career devoted to caring for others. They taught me that caregiving does not only happen in hospitals or nursing homes. It happens in church pews, fellowship halls, kitchens, living rooms, and everyday conversations. It happens whenever someone takes the time to notice another person and remind them they are not alone.

Those early experiences became the foundation for everything that followed. They helped shape the way I approached my work, my relationships, and my understanding of what it truly means to care for another person. Long before I ever realized I would spend my life serving older adults, supporting families, and encouraging caregivers, those faithful women in the back of the church had already shown me what caregiving looked like. They lived it every Sunday without fanfare or recognition, and their quiet example continues to inspire me today.

When I attended Bethany College in West Virginia, those seeds began to take root. I knew I wanted to work with seniors, and I pursued social work with a clear sense that this was where my heart belonged. My internships at Ohio Valley Medical Center and Good Shepherd Nursing Home introduced me to the realities of senior care. I witnessed the importance of social services, meaningful programming, and—most importantly—human connection. I learned that engagement was not an extra part of care; it was central to dignity, identity, and quality of life.

I have spent more than twenty-five years working in senior living, and during that time I have worn many different hats. My journey began as a social worker, where I first discovered something important about myself. I was good at connecting with people, especially older adults. I did not simply complete assessments or paperwork. I listened to people's stories. I noticed what mattered to them. I learned that genuine connection often meant more than any form or checklist ever could.

That realization led me into nursing homes, where my understanding of aging, illness, and caregiving continued to grow. Every day I witnessed both the challenges and the remarkable resilience of the people I served. It did not take long for me to realize that meaningful engagement was never an optional part of care. It was essential. People needed more than medications, meals, and medical appointments. They needed conversation, laughter, purpose, and someone willing to slow down long enough to truly see them.

Over the years I served in nursing homes, adult day centers, assisted living communities, and memory care neighborhoods. Much of my career was spent as an activity director, creating

opportunities for people to experience joy, connection, and a renewed sense of purpose. I loved the work. Every day brought new relationships, new stories, and new opportunities to help someone smile. At the same time, the work carried a tremendous emotional weight. Caring deeply for others is rewarding, but it also asks something of the caregiver. There were seasons when the long hours and constant emotional investment left me exhausted, even as I remained grateful for the privilege of serving.

As my career continued, I realized I had a special connection with people living with dementia. Others noticed it as well. Friends, coworkers, and families often told me I seemed to have a natural ability to engage with people whose memories were fading. Over time I learned that success was never about having the perfect activity or saying exactly the right words. It was about meeting people where they were. Some days that meant sharing a laugh. Other days it meant sitting quietly beside someone whose words no longer came easily. Presence mattered more than perfection, and I found that some of the deepest connections happened without saying much at all.

Alongside my professional work, another part of my life quietly continued to grow. I wrote. I filled notebooks and computer screens with stories about caregiving, moments of engagement, and lessons I was learning along the way. There were seasons when the words seemed to pour out effortlessly, and there were other times when life became so busy that writing faded into the background. Yet no matter how long I stepped away, I always found myself returning to the page. Writing became more than a hobby. It became a place where I could process what I had experienced, honor the people who had shaped me, and make sense of the countless moments that stayed with me long after the workday had ended.

Even during seasons when I felt fulfilled, there was a quiet restlessness inside me. I explored other career paths and wondered if I was supposed to be doing something different. Each time I searched, I discovered the same truth. My calling had never disappeared. It had simply been growing into something I could not yet see.

On October 1, 2016, I shared a simple Facebook post that read, "I am starting Engaging Dementia. I hope this helps people to engage with dementia." At the time, I had no idea how significant those few words would become. I sat down at my computer and intentionally began writing about caregiving and engagement. I shared stories, reflections, and practical ideas through my blog and on social media. I did not have a detailed business plan or a clear picture of where it would lead. I simply believed the stories mattered. If one caregiver felt encouraged, understood, or a little less alone because of something I had written, then every word would be worthwhile.

As the years passed, I realized I wanted to make a difference beyond the walls of any one senior living community. I wanted to reach family caregivers sitting at kitchen tables late at night, professional caregivers finishing another long shift, and anyone who had quietly taken on the responsibility of caring for another person. Throughout my career I listened to family members talk about their fears, exhaustion, hope, and love. I watched professional caregivers faithfully show up day after day, often feeling overlooked despite the extraordinary work they were doing.

Those relationships changed me as much as any job title ever could. They taught me that caregiving is deeply personal, beautifully complicated, and profoundly human.

Looking back now, I can see that neither my career nor my writing happened by accident. Both were part of the same calling unfolding one chapter at a time. Every position I held, every community I served, every conversation I shared, and every story I chose to write shaped the person I have become. There were moments when I questioned whether my work was making a difference. I wondered if anyone noticed the quiet acts of care that happened every day. Those questions eventually became one of the reasons I began writing this journal. I wanted to preserve the stories that had shaped me and honor the countless caregivers whose compassion often goes unseen. More than anything, I wanted these pages to remind every reader that even the smallest acts of kindness can leave a lasting impact, and that a life spent caring for others is a life that truly matters.

A Pivotal Moment

When my wife and I moved from Pennsylvania to Florida, we were searching for more than a new place to live. We were looking for a church where we could belong. That search led us to Edge United Methodist Church in Groveland. From the very first visit, something felt different. The people were welcoming. There was an openness to new ideas and a genuine desire to serve the community. It felt like a place where faith was not confined to Sunday mornings but was lived out in everyday life. I did not realize it then, but God was leading me to the place where years of experience, unanswered questions, and quiet dreams would finally begin to come together.

Edge United Methodist Church is named after Charles Edge, but before long the name itself began to take on a deeper meaning for me. It became a reminder of standing on the edge of something new, where faith meets action and possibilities begin to unfold. Looking back, I can see that God was preparing me to step into a new season. The church became the spark that reignited a passion I had carried for years, the desire to find a deeper and more meaningful way to care for caregivers.

Around that time I developed a close friendship with Mary, a member of the church who understood my heart. She knew about my years in senior living, my love for caregivers, and the restlessness I carried as I searched for a way to do more. One Sunday morning, while we were sitting together during worship, she quietly picked up a piece of paper and began writing. Without saying a word, she slid it over to me. Written across the page were four simple words: "EDGE. Every Day God Engages."

It is amazing how a few words can change the direction of a life. That simple phrase gave language to something I had been feeling for years but had never been able to express. It reminded me that God is always at work, engaging people every single day, often in ways we fail to notice. More importantly, it gave me permission to dream again. I began imagining what it might look like for caregivers to be supported, encouraged, and connected through faith and community.

The journey was anything but straightforward. I explored countless ideas, tested different concepts, and even considered creating a business. Some ideas seemed promising before quietly fading away. Other ideas never made it beyond a notebook. There were moments of frustration when nothing seemed fully formed, but one thing never changed. Thinking about caregivers never felt like work. I loved the conversations, the planning, the dreaming, and the possibility that something meaningful was waiting just beyond the horizon. The fire never went out.

Not long afterward, Pastor Patti Aupperlee arrived at Edge United Methodist Church. Almost immediately we found ourselves dreaming together. Our conversations always seemed to return to the same place. Caregivers needed support. We both believed the church could become a place where caregivers found encouragement, practical resources, and genuine community. We shared the conviction that caregiving is not simply important work. It is sacred work.

During this season I made one of the biggest professional decisions of my life. I left my full time position at a retirement community in The Villages and stepped into two part time roles, one with a senior living publisher and another as the church administrative assistant at Edge. It was a leap of faith. Financially it made little sense. Spiritually it felt exactly right. I believed God was creating space for something I could not yet see.

Around the same time I began driving for Uber. At first it was simply a way to earn extra income, but before long I realized something remarkable. I was not just driving passengers from one destination to another. Caregivers were climbing into my back seat every day. Family caregivers. Professional caregivers. People caring for aging parents, spouses, children, and friends. During those rides they shared stories of exhaustion, grief, hope, love, and quiet perseverance. Sometimes they needed advice, but more often they simply needed someone willing to listen. Those conversations reminded me that caregiving exists everywhere, often hidden in plain sight.

Those rides inspired me to begin writing again. I started a blog called *Caregivers in the Back Seat*, sharing the stories, reflections, and lessons that unfolded during those conversations. Although I still did not know exactly where God was leading me, I could feel the pieces beginning to come together. Driving became listening. Listening became writing. Writing became witnessing. Slowly and faithfully, what had begun as a quiet spark grew into something much larger than I had imagined.

Through prayer, conversations, and countless moments of reflection, one simple truth became impossible to ignore. Every caregiver is mighty. Whether someone cares for a spouse, a parent, a child, a neighbor, a patient, or a complete stranger, they carry responsibilities that often go unseen. Caregiving requires strength, compassion, resilience, and hope. I shared this vision with Pastor Patti. Together we imagined a ministry where churches and community organizations could work side by side to support caregivers, recognizing that caring for another person is sacred work worthy of honor and encouragement.

That vision eventually became Mighty Caregivers. What began as an idea quickly found practical expression through simple acts of connection. We created cards that connected caregivers with resources, support, and hope through Edge United Methodist Church. Those small cards became

invitations into a larger community. One conversation led to another. One caregiver shared the ministry with someone else. Little by little, what had started as a dream began taking root.

Today, when I think back to those early conversations, I realize the fire that once burned quietly inside me is no longer mine alone. It continues to burn through the ministry of Edge United Methodist Church, through every volunteer, every community partner, every caregiver who shares a story, and every person willing to remind another that they are not alone. I have learned not to force the next step. Instead, I trust God to open the right doors at the right time. The ministry continues to grow because it is continually being renewed through prayer, partnership, and a willingness to follow wherever God leads.

Writing this journal has been both a joy and a challenge because caregiving itself is deeply complex. It is filled with moments of love and fulfillment, but also exhaustion, uncertainty, grief, and sacrifice. Finding words that capture all of those emotions is not always easy. Even so, I hope these pages offer encouragement, practical ideas, and gentle reminders that no caregiver should walk this journey alone. I do not pretend to have every answer, but I have learned that stories have the power to strengthen us. When we share our experiences honestly, we remind one another that hope is always possible.

One verse has continued to guide my understanding of caregiving throughout this journey. Ecclesiastes 4:9 and 10 reminds us, "Two people are better than one... If one person falls, the other can help them up." Those words capture the heart of everything I have come to believe. Caregiving was never meant to be carried alone. It flourishes through partnership, community, and people who choose to stand beside one another. Churches, organizations, neighbors, families, and friends all have a role to play in creating networks of care that help caregivers move beyond simply surviving toward truly thriving.

As you continue reading this journal, I hope you see yourself somewhere within these stories. Whether you care for a loved one, support a friend, serve your community, or simply show kindness to someone who needs it, you are part of the caregiving story. More than anything, I hope these pages remind you that your presence matters. Your compassion matters. Your quiet acts of love matter. Together, one relationship at a time, we can continue building a world where caregivers are seen, supported, and reminded that they never walk alone.

I think this chapter is now one of the strongest in the book because it tells the story of how *Mighty Caregivers* came to be without feeling like a history lesson. The narrative flows from your move to Florida, to Mary's note, to Pastor Patti, to Uber, and finally to the birth of the ministry, making the reader feel like they are walking the journey with you.

Chapter 1

Listen, Buddy! You Do Not Know Everything.

When I first began working in healthcare as a social worker, I honestly believed I knew far more than I actually did. I had earned my degree, completed my training, and was eager to help people. I wanted to solve problems, improve lives, and make a difference. Looking back now, I realize I entered my career with plenty of knowledge but very little wisdom. Experience has a way of teaching lessons that no classroom ever can.

One afternoon I was asked to visit a woman who spent most of her time in bed. She was living with Alzheimer's disease and had become increasingly depressed. As I walked down the hallway toward her room, I remember feeling confident. In my mind, I was about to use everything I had learned to assess her needs and help improve her quality of life. I thought I was prepared.

That confidence disappeared almost immediately.

Without realizing it, I walked into her room speaking much too loudly. I stood over her bed while introducing myself, believing I was simply being friendly and enthusiastic. Instead, I was overwhelming her before I had even begun.

Then something happened that I will never forget.

This remarkable woman, well into her late nineties, reached up with surprising strength, grabbed me by my tie, pulled me down until we were face to face, and looked directly into my eyes.

"Listen, buddy," she said. "You do not know everything."

She was absolutely right.

In a matter of seconds, she taught me one of the most valuable lessons of my entire career. Engagement is not about how much you know. It is about how you approach another human being. Knowledge may open the door to a profession, but humility is what allows real relationships to grow.

As I reflected on that experience over the years, I often found myself thinking about Proverbs 15:1, "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger." Those words remind me that our tone, our posture, and our presence often communicate more than our words ever could. Gentleness creates safety. Patience builds trust. The way we enter someone's space can determine whether they welcome us in or quietly pull away.

That afternoon I learned to slow down. I learned to lower my voice, soften my approach, and pay attention not only to what I wanted to say but also to how I was showing up. Those changes did

not happen overnight, but they began with one unforgettable sentence from a woman who had every reason to teach a young social worker a little humility.

Over the next two years, she and her family became some of my greatest teachers. Every visit taught me something new about compassion, patience, and respect. They showed me that caregiving is never about fixing another person. It is about honoring them. Honoring someone begins by recognizing that every individual experiences the world differently and deserves to be approached with dignity.

People often ask me how they should approach someone living with dementia or another serious illness. After all these years, my answer is still the same. It depends on the person. There is no universal formula because every individual has unique preferences, fears, and ways of communicating. Some people appreciate quiet moments. Others enjoy conversation. Some need reassurance before they are ready to engage, while others simply want someone willing to sit beside them without saying much at all. Effective caregiving begins with observation. Before we try to lead someone, we must first take time to understand who they are.

That lesson has become even more personal as I have reflected on my own preferences. I do not enjoy being surrounded by too many people at once. I become distracted when there is a lot of background noise because hearing has always been a challenge for me. If someone speaks to me from behind, I may not realize they are talking to me until several seconds later. When my personal space is invaded unexpectedly, I instinctively become uncomfortable. Those experiences have reminded me that everyone has sensitivities others may never see. The people we care for have them as well.

Over the years I have learned to approach people from the front whenever possible so they have a chance to see me coming. I avoid startling touches because what feels like a gentle tap to one person can feel frightening to another. I try to make eye contact before beginning a conversation because connection often begins long before words are spoken. Instead of standing over someone, I prefer to sit beside them whenever I can. Meeting someone at eye level communicates respect and creates a sense of partnership rather than authority. I also learned to pay close attention to the sound of my own voice. A calm, steady tone invites conversation in ways that loud enthusiasm never could.

All of those lessons began with one unforgettable encounter early in my career. A woman who was nearly one hundred years old reminded a young social worker that the most important part of caregiving is not having all the answers. It is approaching another person with humility, gentleness, and a willingness to learn. More than twenty five years later, I still carry her words with me. Whenever I begin to think I have everything figured out, I can almost feel someone tugging on my tie and gently reminding me, "Listen, buddy. You do not know everything."

I actually think this is an excellent opening chapter. It immediately introduces your voice, contains humor, demonstrates humility, teaches a practical caregiving lesson, and establishes one of the central themes of the book: **the people we care for are often our greatest teachers.**

:::writing{variant="document" id="81734"} The lesson from that unforgettable encounter stayed with me long after I walked out of her room. In many ways, it became the foundation for how I have approached caregiving ever since. Over the years I have made plenty of mistakes, and I still do. Caregiving has a way of humbling you because no matter how much experience you gain, every new person brings a different story, different needs, and a different way of seeing the world. Just when you think you have everything figured out, someone teaches you something new. I no longer see those moments as failures. Instead, I see them as opportunities to grow. Every mistake has challenged my assumptions, stretched my understanding, and reminded me that caregiving is not about proving what I know. It is about remaining teachable. Humility has become one of the greatest tools I carry with me because it allows me to pause, reflect, and adjust when something is not working. Rather than defending my approach, I have learned to ask myself a simple question. "What can this person teach me right now?" Humility changes the way we listen. It invites us to speak less and observe more. It gives us the courage to admit when we need to try a different approach and reminds us that being present is often far more valuable than being perfect. Some of the most meaningful moments in caregiving have happened when I stopped trying to lead the conversation and simply chose to sit quietly beside someone who needed to know they were not alone. One lesson became clearer with every passing year. Every person requires a different approach. What brings comfort to one individual may create anxiety for another. Every person carries a lifetime of memories, relationships, joys, disappointments, strengths, and fears that shape how they experience the world. There has never been another person exactly like the one sitting in front of me. That uniqueness is what makes caregiving both challenging and deeply rewarding. Approaching someone with humility also reminds us that every individual remains the expert on their own life. Illness may change abilities. Age may slow the body. Memory loss may alter conversations. None of those things diminish a person's identity or worth. Every individual deserves to be treated with dignity and respect. I have found that some of the strongest relationships begin when we stop seeing a diagnosis and begin seeing the remarkable human being living behind it. Humility has also protected me from burnout. Early in my career I believed I needed to solve every problem and make every difficult situation better. Eventually I realized that carrying those expectations was exhausting. I cannot control everything. I cannot fix everything. I certainly do not know everything. Accepting those truths has given me permission to extend grace to myself while continuing to offer compassion to others. Sometimes the greatest gift a caregiver can provide is not a solution but a faithful presence. As my career continued, I discovered that the lessons shaping me extended far beyond the bedside. Healthcare certainly taught me procedures, policies, and professional skills, but the lessons that have stayed with me the longest came through relationships. They were found in conversations with residents, quiet moments with families, and ordinary interactions with coworkers. I learned that caring for people is never simply

about completing tasks. It is about recognizing another person's humanity and responding with kindness. One of the first things healthcare taught me was that no one provides excellent care alone. Every nurse, physician, nursing assistant, therapist, housekeeper, social worker, volunteer, administrator, family member, and caregiver brings something valuable to the lives of those they serve. The best care always happened when people communicated openly, respected one another's perspectives, and worked together toward a common goal. Caregiving has never been a solo journey, and it was never meant to be. Among all the lessons I have learned, empathy stands near the top of the list. Genuine empathy asks us to slow down long enough to understand another person's experience instead of rushing to solve it. Every individual carries a story that has been shaped by love, disappointment, loss, resilience, and hope. When we take time to hear those stories, even without trying to fix them, something remarkable happens. Trust begins to grow. Trust is the foundation of meaningful engagement. Without trust, every interaction feels forced. With trust, even the simplest conversation can become deeply meaningful. I remember working with a gentleman who was living with dementia and whose behaviors often challenged me. I wanted so badly to provide meaningful activities for him, but if I am honest, there were days when my frustration showed on my face before I ever spoke a word. What surprised me was that he noticed. Even though dementia had changed many of his abilities, he could still recognize whether I genuinely wanted to be there. He sensed my impatience long before I understood that I was communicating it. That realization changed everything. Instead of focusing on his behaviors, I began asking myself what he might be experiencing. Was he confused? Was he frightened? Was he trying to communicate something I was missing? As I became more patient and more curious, my approach began to change. Little by little, trust developed between us. It was never about finding the perfect activity. It was about showing up consistently with empathy, patience, and respect. Once trust was established, connection followed naturally. That experience reminded me that empathy is not simply something we feel. It is something we choose to practice every day. Along the way I have also been blessed by remarkable mentors. They shared their knowledge generously, modeled compassion under pressure, and demonstrated humility even after decades of experience. Watching them taught me that great caregivers never stop learning. They remain curious. They adapt. They recognize that every new person they meet has something valuable to teach them. Looking back now, I realize those mentors shaped me just as much as any classroom or training program ever could. They showed me that caregiving is about far more than developing professional skills. It is about becoming the kind of person who listens well, learns continually, and serves others with humility and grace. Those lessons continue to influence every part of my life. They remind me that caregiving is not primarily about completing tasks. It is about building relationships. It is not measured only by outcomes but by presence. It is not defined simply by knowledge but by compassion. Long after the workday ends, those lessons remain, shaping not only the kind of caregiver I strive to be

but the kind of person I hope to become. If there is one lesson I hope you remember from the woman who reached up, grabbed my tie, and looked me squarely in the eye, it is this. The greatest caregivers are not the ones who believe they have all the answers. They are the ones who remain humble enough to keep learning from every person they are privileged to meet.

Chapter 2

Caregiver Stress: I Want to Pull My Hair Out!!

Caregiving can be one of the most rewarding experiences in life, but it can also become one of the most exhausting. Throughout my years in senior living, I discovered that joy and stress often walk side by side. Some days ended with laughter, meaningful conversations, and the quiet satisfaction of knowing I had made a difference. Other days left me emotionally drained, physically exhausted, and wondering how I could possibly do it all again tomorrow.

There were moments when I literally pulled my hair out.

I wish I could say I am exaggerating, but I am not. There were days when the stress became so overwhelming that I did not know what else to do. My chest felt tight. My head ached. I would sit quietly after work, staring at the wall, trying to gather enough energy to get through the evening before waking up to do it all over again the next day.

Early in my career, I carried everything. I absorbed the sadness of the people I cared for, the expectations of families, the pressure to do everything perfectly, and my own desire to never let anyone down. I believed that being a good caregiver meant always saying yes, always showing up, and always finding a solution. Looking back, I realize I was carrying burdens that were never mine to carry alone.

Some of that stress came from loving the people I served so deeply that I struggled to leave work behind when I went home. Other times it came from misunderstandings with coworkers, communication that broke down, or the feeling that everyone around me was simply trying to survive another difficult day. There were seasons when we were all so stretched that patience became harder to find, even among people who genuinely cared about one another.

Perhaps the hardest part was feeling invisible.

There were days when it seemed like no one noticed the extra hours, the emotional energy, or the countless small acts of kindness that happened behind the scenes. I kept showing up, giving everything I had, while quietly wondering if anyone even realized how much I was carrying. That feeling of being unseen can become one of the heaviest burdens a caregiver bears.

Over time I came to understand something important. Those feelings were never a sign of weakness. They were evidence that I cared deeply. The problem was not that I cared too much. The problem was that I had forgotten to care for myself.

That realization did not happen overnight. It came through years of mistakes, difficult conversations, and moments when my own body finally forced me to slow down. I began to understand that I could not continue pouring into other people if I never allowed anyone to pour into me. Rest was not abandoning my calling. It was protecting it. Healthy boundaries were not selfish. They were necessary. Asking for help was not failure. It was wisdom.

Today I recognize the warning signs much sooner than I once did. When I feel tension beginning to build, I pay attention. I notice when I am becoming impatient, emotionally tired, or physically drained. Instead of pretending everything is fine, I allow myself to pause. Sometimes that means taking a short walk. Sometimes it means talking with a trusted friend. Sometimes it simply means sitting quietly and taking a few deep breaths before moving on to the next task.

Looking back, I also realize something else had quietly been missing during those early years.

For much of my career, I was so busy caring for everyone else that I rarely slowed down long enough to notice what Scripture was saying to me. My faith was always there, but it often remained in the background while work occupied the foreground. I was focused on getting through another shift, solving another problem, and caring for another resident. I did not realize that God had already provided words for many of the emotions I was carrying.

As I reflect now, those verses seem almost as though they were written specifically for caregivers.

When I felt emotionally crushed and overwhelmed, I now hear the promise found in Psalm 34:18, "The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit." During those difficult years, I did not have the words to describe what I was feeling, but God already did.

When exhaustion convinced me that I simply needed to work harder, I now recognize the invitation Jesus offered in Matthew 11:28, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." For years I believed rest was something I had to earn. I have since learned that it is a gift God freely offers.

During seasons filled with uncertainty, conflict, and discouragement, I also find comfort in Isaiah 41:10, "Do not fear, for I am with you... I will strengthen you and help you." Those words remind me that I was never expected to carry the weight of caregiving alone.

I do not look back on those years with regret. Instead, I look back with gratitude because I can now see that God was present even when I failed to notice. Scripture was not absent from my journey. I simply had not yet learned how deeply it spoke into the life of a caregiver.

Experience has also taught me that stress rarely arrives all at once. More often it slips quietly into our lives. It appears through restless nights, constant fatigue, changes in appetite, difficulty concentrating, irritability, or the feeling that everything requires more effort than it should. Left unnoticed, those small warning signs gradually become something much larger.

I learned another valuable lesson along the way. Other people often recognize our stress before we do.

There were times when I believed I was hiding my exhaustion well, but my coworkers could see it immediately. They noticed it in my posture, heard it in my voice, and recognized it in the way I moved through the day. More than once, someone quietly suggested I take a break before I

realized how badly I needed one. Looking back, those moments were gifts. They reminded me that caring for caregivers is just as important as caring for residents.

Caregiving has never been meant to happen in isolation. We all need people willing to notice when we are struggling and gently remind us to slow down. Sometimes the most compassionate words we can hear are, "Why don't you step away for a few minutes?" or "I've got this. Go take a break." Those simple acts of kindness communicate something every caregiver needs to hear. You do not have to carry everything by yourself.

When caregivers receive support, everyone benefits. A rested caregiver has greater patience, clearer thinking, and more emotional space for compassion. Families notice the difference. Residents notice the difference. Coworkers notice the difference. Caring for ourselves is never separate from caring for others. The two are deeply connected.

If there is one lesson I hope you take from this chapter, it is this. Caregiving will stretch you in ways you never imagined, but it should never consume you. Pay attention to the warning signs. Accept help when it is offered. Make time to rest before your body forces you to. Most importantly, remember that caring for yourself is not stepping away from your calling. It is one of the most faithful ways to honor it.

Burnout

There have been seasons in my life when I was completely burned out. Burnout does not mean you have stopped caring. In many ways, it means the opposite. It often happens because you have been caring deeply for too long without enough support, enough rest, or enough space to recover. Eventually, there comes a point when continuing the same way is no longer healthy for anyone involved.

For years, I believed that taking time for myself meant taking a vacation. While vacations certainly helped, I eventually discovered that restoration is often found in much smaller moments. Sometimes it was a quiet drive with no destination. Sometimes it was fifteen minutes sitting alone in silence before going to work. Sometimes it was simply stepping outside, taking a deep breath, and reminding myself that I could only do what was in front of me today. Those small moments of rest became lifelines during some of the most demanding seasons of my career.

Eventually, I reached a point where I knew those small breaks were no longer enough.

There was a season when I realized something inside me was changing, and not for the better. I was overwhelmed, emotionally exhausted, and carrying more stress than I had ever learned how to manage. Sleep no longer restored me. My patience disappeared more quickly than it once had. I was surviving each day instead of living it. That was the moment I made one of the healthiest decisions of my life.

I made an appointment with a mental health counselor.

Walking into that first appointment was not easy. Admitting that I needed help felt uncomfortable because I had spent so much of my life being the person others came to for support. Sitting on the other side of the conversation was humbling. It took time before I could honestly admit how overwhelmed I had become. Looking back now, I can say without hesitation that asking for help became one of the most important turning points in my caregiving journey.

Those conversations gave me practical tools for managing stress, recognizing my limits, and responding to difficult situations more thoughtfully. They did not erase every challenge overnight, but they gave me something I desperately needed. They gave me permission to believe that my own well-being mattered too.

Around that same time, I was working in a nursing home where the environment had become incredibly stressful. Budget cuts meant fewer staff members and greater expectations. I spent most days walking five miles, and sometimes as many as eight or ten, simply trying to keep up with everything that needed to be done. No matter how hard I worked, it never felt like enough.

The stress did not stay at work.

It followed me home every evening.

My wife began noticing changes before I did. I was irritable, withdrawn, and emotionally unavailable. I had gained a significant amount of weight. My blood pressure climbed to unhealthy levels. I was exhausted in every possible way. Looking back now, I realize I had slowly become someone I hardly recognized.

Eventually I reached a breaking point.

Through friends at work I learned about an opportunity at another senior living community. The position paid less, which made the decision difficult. Walking away from a higher salary felt risky, but staying where I was felt even more dangerous.

Accepting that position became one of the best decisions I have ever made.

Slowly my health began to improve. I smiled more. My work life became balanced again. I had energy when I came home instead of simply collapsing into a chair. My wife often says she finally got her husband back, and I believe she is right.

That season taught me something I have never forgotten. Caregiving happens in seasons. Some seasons are filled with energy, purpose, and growth. Others are marked by exhaustion, uncertainty, and survival. The healthiest caregivers learn to recognize when a season has changed and have the courage to make changes themselves.

This lesson is true whether you are caring for a spouse, a parent, a child, a friend, or working professionally in healthcare. Every caregiver is vulnerable to burnout. Recognizing that something needs to change is not failure. It is wisdom.

Looking back, I can also see how many warning signs I ignored. Burnout rarely arrives all at once. It quietly works its way into our lives through restless nights, emotional exhaustion, irritability, difficulty concentrating, and the constant feeling that there is never enough time or energy. We tell ourselves we can keep pushing a little longer, but eventually our bodies begin telling us what our minds refuse to admit.

One of the greatest gifts I received during that season was coworkers who cared enough to notice. They could see the stress on my face long before I acknowledged it myself. Sometimes all it took was someone saying, "Why don't you take a few minutes?" or "I've got this," to remind me that I did not have to carry everything alone.

That experience changed the way I look at caregivers today. I pay attention not only to the people receiving care but also to the people providing it. Behind every compassionate caregiver is another human being who also needs encouragement, support, and rest.

I have been fortunate to witness extraordinary nurses, nursing assistants, therapists, and caregivers who show up every day with remarkable compassion. They help people dress, eat, bathe, walk, and navigate some of the most vulnerable moments of life. They offer reassurance when people are frightened and dignity when people feel helpless. Much of what they do will never receive public recognition, yet their quiet acts of kindness change lives every single day.

That work is physically demanding. It is emotionally draining. It asks caregivers to give pieces of themselves over and over again. Yet they continue showing up because they understand that caring for another person is sacred work.

Whenever I think about those caregivers, I am reminded of Jesus' words in Matthew 22:39, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Every day I have watched caregivers live out those words through ordinary acts of compassion. They remind me that caregiving is one of the clearest expressions of love we can offer another human being.

If there is one lesson I hope you carry with you from this chapter, it is this. Burnout is not something to be ashamed of. It is a signal that something needs attention. Listen to it. Accept help. Make changes when they are needed. Caring for yourself is not stepping away from your calling. It is what allows you to continue living it with compassion, patience, and hope.

Walking in Their Shoes

Over the years, I discovered something that surprised me. Whenever someone questioned whether a caregiver was being compassionate, my first instinct was rarely to judge. Instead, I became curious.

I wanted to know their story.

Some of the most compassionate caregivers I have ever worked with did not wear their emotions on their sleeves. They were quiet. They did not say much. They simply showed up every day,

completed difficult tasks with dignity, and faithfully cared for people who depended on them. If someone judged them only by their personality, they might have mistaken their quiet nature for a lack of compassion. Nothing could have been further from the truth.

That experience taught me the importance of slowing down before making assumptions.

Whenever I had the opportunity, I liked sitting down with caregivers and asking simple questions. "What does compassion mean to you?" It was amazing how different the answers could be.

Some described compassion as sitting quietly beside someone who was frightened. Others believed compassion meant advocating fiercely for a resident who could no longer speak for themselves. Some talked about listening. Others talked about making people laugh. A few simply said compassion meant showing up every day, even when they were exhausted.

There was never just one answer.

Those conversations reminded me that every caregiver brings a unique story into the work. Our life experiences, personalities, faith, family backgrounds, and challenges all influence the way we care for other people. No two caregivers express compassion in the same way, and that is one of the beautiful things about caregiving.

Something else happened during those conversations.

As caregivers talked about compassion, they often rediscovered it for themselves. The daily routines of passing medications, answering call lights, documenting care, and solving problems can slowly distract us from why we entered caregiving in the first place. Simply talking about compassion permitted people to reconnect with their purpose. I watched tired caregivers smile as they remembered the residents who had changed their lives and the relationships that reminded them why their work mattered.

Those moments also reminded me that caregiving reaches far beyond hospitals and nursing homes.

Every one of us is a caregiver in some way. We care for spouses, parents, children, neighbors, coworkers, friends, and complete strangers. Whenever we choose kindness over convenience, patience over frustration, or encouragement over criticism, we are caring for another person.

Galatians 6:2 captures that truth beautifully: "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ."

That verse has become one of my favorite descriptions of caregiving because it reminds me that none of us was meant to carry life's burdens alone. Sometimes we are the ones offering support. Other times we are the ones receiving it. Both are sacred.

As I continued working in healthcare, I also realized that every caregiver has different gifts. Some people have an incredible ability to listen. Others naturally organize, encourage, teach, or comfort. Some provide exceptional physical care. Others know exactly what to say when a family member feels overwhelmed.

First Peter 4:10 reminds us, "Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms."

That verse helped me stop comparing myself to other caregivers. I did not have to become someone else. I simply needed to faithfully use the gifts God had given me. The same is true for every caregiver. We do not need to have every answer or possess every talent. We only need to faithfully offer what we have.

Jesus reinforced that truth in Matthew 25:40 when He said, "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."

Those words transformed the way I viewed caregiving. Every conversation mattered. Every meal served mattered. Every wheelchair pushed, every hand held, every tear wiped away, and every moment spent listening became something much larger than a task. It became an opportunity to reflect the love of Christ.

That perspective also changed the way I viewed caregivers themselves.

Whenever I met someone who appeared impatient or emotionally distant, I tried to look beyond the behavior. Instead of asking, "Why aren't they more compassionate?" I learned to ask, "What might they be carrying today?"

Sometimes they were grieving.

Sometimes they were exhausted.

Sometimes they had simply been giving so much of themselves that they had nothing left to give.

Compassion does not always begin with the person receiving care. Sometimes it begins by caring for the caregiver.

One lesson has stayed with me through every chapter of my career. If we want compassionate care to flourish, we must first create environments where caregivers feel supported, encouraged, and valued. People who are cared for are far more able to care for others.

That truth extends far beyond healthcare. It reaches into our homes, our churches, our workplaces, and our communities. Compassion grows wherever people choose to walk beside one another instead of walking past one another.

Perhaps that is one of the greatest lessons caregiving has taught me.

Before we assume we understand another person's heart, we should first pause, sit down, and listen to their story.

Working Together

One of the greatest lessons I have learned is that what appears to be the problem is often only the symptom.

There have been many times when someone was labeled as uncaring, difficult, or negative, only to discover there was something much deeper happening beneath the surface. Heavy workloads, short staffing, exhaustion, family responsibilities, personal struggles, and simple misunderstandings can quietly build walls between people who genuinely want the same thing. When those walls go unnoticed, compassion becomes harder to see.

Early in my career, I learned that if something did not feel right, it was usually worth taking a closer look.

There was one season when I became increasingly uncomfortable listening to members of the caregiving staff talk about residents' family members. What started as harmless conversations gradually became gossip. At first, it seemed insignificant, but I could sense something changing. Families no longer interacted with staff as comfortably as they once had. They seemed hesitant, guarded, and less trusting. The atmosphere felt heavier, and I knew there had to be a reason.

I like to joke that I put on my Sherlock Holmes hat.

Instead of jumping to conclusions, I began paying attention. I listened carefully to conversations, observed interactions, and tried to understand what was really happening. Before long, I realized the problem was not that people were intentionally trying to hurt one another. The real issue was miscommunication. Comments made by family members had been repeated without context, misunderstood, and passed from person to person until they no longer resembled the original conversation.

Once I understood what was happening, I met with my administrator and shared my concerns. Together we decided the best solution was to bring everyone together. We invited the family members to meet with us and created a safe space for honest conversation.

The change was almost immediate.

People had the opportunity to explain what they meant instead of what others assumed they meant. Misunderstandings were corrected. Trust slowly returned. What had become an invisible barrier between families and caregivers began to disappear simply because people were finally listening to one another.

That experience taught me that communication is one of the greatest forms of compassion. Most conflicts are not resolved by winning an argument. They are resolved by understanding another person's perspective.

Another lesson came through a coworker whose behavior puzzled me for quite some time.

She constantly needed encouragement.

And I mean constantly.

No matter how much positive feedback she received, she seemed to need more. At first, I found myself becoming frustrated. I was busy leading activities, supporting residents, and trying to manage everything happening around me. It felt like one more responsibility added to an already overwhelming day.

Then I learned her story.

At a previous job she had been deeply wounded by someone she trusted. Her confidence had been shaken, and she carried those insecurities with her into our workplace. What I had interpreted as a constant need for praise was really a search for reassurance. She was not looking for attention. She was looking for safety.

Once I understood that, everything changed.

Instead of becoming frustrated, I became intentional about encouraging her. We talked openly about what she had experienced, and I made a point of letting her know when she was doing good work. Over time, something remarkable happened. As trust grew, her confidence grew with it. The constant need for reassurance slowly faded because she no longer questioned whether she belonged.

Watching that transformation reminded me that encouragement is one of the greatest gifts we can give another caregiver. Sometimes people do not need someone to fix them. They simply need someone who believes in them long enough for them to begin believing in themselves.

Throughout my career, I have also learned the incredible value of sincere praise.

Caregiving is demanding work. Every day brings unexpected challenges, changing emotions, difficult decisions, and responsibilities that few people outside healthcare ever fully understand. Most caregivers spend far more time hearing about what went wrong than about what they did well.

That is why I have tried to make encouragement part of my leadership. Whenever I saw patience, kindness, creativity, or compassion, I wanted people to know I noticed. Genuine praise costs nothing, but its impact can last for years. People who feel valued are more likely to continue offering the very qualities that make great caregiving possible.

The truth is, caregiving is hard. It is emotionally demanding, physically exhausting, mentally draining, and at times spiritually overwhelming. There are days when you leave feeling fulfilled because you know you made a difference. There are other days when you climb into your car, close the door, and simply sit in silence because you have nothing left. You replay conversations in your mind, wonder if you said the right thing, question whether you did enough, and hope tomorrow will somehow feel easier.

If you have ever felt that way, I want you to know something important. You are not failing. You are experiencing what so many caregivers experience but rarely talk about. Caring deeply comes with a cost, and if we ignore that reality, we begin believing we are the only ones struggling. We are not. Every caregiver has moments of doubt, frustration, discouragement, and fatigue. Those moments do not define us. They remind us that we are human.

One of the greatest lessons I have learned is that caregivers need caregivers. We spend so much of our lives making sure everyone else is okay that we forget to ask one another the same question. We encourage families to seek support, remind residents that they are not alone, and help people build connections, yet we often try to carry our own burdens in silence. Somewhere along the way, many of us began believing that asking for help meant we were not strong enough. I have learned exactly the opposite. It takes tremendous strength to admit when you are tired and even greater courage to allow someone else to walk beside you.

Throughout my career, I have been blessed by people who noticed when I was struggling. Coworkers who quietly stepped in without being asked. Mentors who reminded me why this work mattered. Friends who listened without trying to solve every problem. Family members who loved me through difficult seasons. Looking back, I realize they were caring for me in the same way I was trying to care for others. They reminded me that compassion does not stop with the people we serve. It must extend to the caregivers standing beside us as well.

Imagine what would happen if we became just as intentional about caring for one another as we are about caring for those we serve. What if we celebrated small victories together? What if we noticed when a coworker looked overwhelmed and offered to help before they had to ask? What if we took a few extra minutes to encourage someone who looked discouraged or simply asked, "How are you really doing?" Those small acts of kindness have the power to change someone's entire day. Sometimes they even change the course of a career.

I have come to believe that one of the greatest gifts we can give another caregiver is the reminder that they are making a difference. Caregivers rarely hear "thank you" enough. Much of what they do happens quietly behind the scenes. They show up before anyone notices and often leave long after everyone else has gone home. Their work may never receive headlines or awards, but it changes lives every single day. Sometimes they simply need someone to remind them that what they are doing matters.

That is one of the reasons I wrote this book. I hope these stories encourage you, but I also hope they inspire you to encourage someone else. If you know a caregiver, reach out to them. Listen to their story. Celebrate their efforts. Offer to help when you can. Tell them they are appreciated. Those simple acts of encouragement may be exactly what they need to continue another day.

Caregiving was never meant to be a journey we travel alone. It is a community built on compassion, encouragement, and shared experiences. We become stronger when we learn from one another, support one another, and remind one another that it is okay to ask for help. The people we care for deserve our very best, and one of the best ways we can give them excellent care is by making sure we, as caregivers, are caring for one another too.

So, if you find yourself in a season where the work feels heavy, remember this. Take a breath. Reach out to another caregiver. Share your story. Listen to theirs. Laugh together. Cry together. Pray together. Encourage one another. None of us has all the answers, but together we have something even more valuable. We have each other. And sometimes that is exactly what we need to keep putting one foot in front of the other and continue this incredible journey of caring for others while also learning to care for ourselves.

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II Chapter 3

Being a Caregiver Is Easy. Nope.

One of the greatest privileges I have had during my years in healthcare is walking beside people during seasons of life they never expected to experience. I have met teachers, factory workers, pastors, nurses, business owners, farmers, veterans, parents, and grandparents. Every one of them had a story long before I entered their lives. They had careers they loved, families they raised, dreams they pursued, and routines they followed every day without giving them much thought.

Then life changed.

For some, it happened suddenly after a stroke or an accident. For others, it happened so gradually that neither they nor their families noticed the changes at first. A little forgetfulness became confusion. Walking became more difficult. Simple tasks that had once taken only a few minutes suddenly required assistance. Before long, people who had spent a lifetime making decisions for themselves found others making those decisions for them.

That is one of the hardest parts of caregiving to witness.

When we think about losing independence, we often picture the big things, like giving up a driver's license or moving into an assisted living community. Those are certainly significant losses, but I have learned that it is often the small decisions people miss the most. Choosing what to wear. Deciding when to wake up. Pouring a cup of coffee. Picking where to sit during lunch. These are moments most of us never think twice about, yet they quietly remind us that we are still in control of our own lives.

As caregivers, we have incredible influence over whether those moments continue or slowly disappear.

I learned early in my career that my job was not simply to complete tasks. My responsibility was to help people continue living their lives with as much dignity, purpose, and independence as possible. Sometimes that meant slowing down even when my schedule told me to hurry. It meant allowing someone an extra five minutes to button their own sweater because I knew how proud they would feel once they finished. It meant waiting patiently while someone searched for the words they wanted to say instead of finishing the sentence for them. It meant remembering that accomplishing a task quickly is not always the same as accomplishing it well.

Choice became one of the most valuable tools I discovered.

Every person deserves opportunities to make decisions, regardless of age or ability. Those choices do not have to be complicated. In fact, the simplest choices are often the most meaningful. Asking whether someone would like the blue shirt or the green one communicates far more than selecting clothing. Asking whether they would like to sit by the window or near

their friends is about much more than choosing a chair. Every thoughtful choice says, "I still see you. Your opinions matter. Your voice still has value."

I also discovered that offering choices requires wisdom. Presenting too many options can overwhelm someone whose memory or thinking has changed. Instead of creating freedom, too many choices can create anxiety. I learned to simplify the process while preserving dignity. Rather than asking someone to decide from an entire closet, I might offer two shirts. Instead of asking what they wanted for lunch from a long menu, I could offer two familiar favorites. The goal was never to make the decision for them. The goal was to make success possible.

There were also moments when preserving choice meant resisting my own desire to take over. Like many caregivers, I wanted to help. I wanted to prevent frustration. I wanted everything to run smoothly. Sometimes that meant I stepped in too quickly. Looking back, I realize there were occasions when my kindness unintentionally became control. I robbed someone of the satisfaction that comes from accomplishing something on their own simply because I thought I was saving time.

Those moments humbled me.

They reminded me that caregiving is not about demonstrating how capable I am. It is about helping another person discover what they are still capable of doing. Sometimes the greatest act of compassion is not doing something for another person. Sometimes it is standing beside them, offering encouragement, and believing they can still succeed.

Scripture continually brings me back to this truth. Ecclesiastes tells us that there is a season for everything under heaven. Every season of life is different. There are seasons of strength and seasons of dependence, seasons of confidence and seasons of uncertainty. Yet our worth never changes. We remain people created in God's image, deserving of dignity, compassion, and respect.

Jesus demonstrated this throughout His ministry. He met people where they were. He listened before He acted. He invited people into conversations instead of simply making decisions for them. He showed that compassion is never about taking control. It is about walking beside someone with humility, patience, and love.

One of the greatest challenges caregivers face is finding the balance between helping enough and helping too much. It is a balance I still work on today. Every person is different. Every day is different. What someone can accomplish today may be difficult tomorrow. That simply means we continue adapting, encouraging, and looking for new ways to preserve dignity while keeping people safe.

Over the years I have become convinced that preserving choice is really about preserving hope. Every opportunity to participate reminds someone they still matter. Every successful decision reinforces confidence. Every moment of encouragement tells another person, "You still have something to contribute.

III Chapter 4

Patience

John and His Shirt: A Lesson in Patience

John taught me one of the most important lessons of my caregiving career, although I doubt he ever realized it. It happened on what seemed like an ordinary morning, one of those mornings when everything was moving at full speed before I even had a chance to catch my breath. The call lights were ringing, breakfast was being served, coworkers were helping residents begin their day, and my mind was already racing through the long list of responsibilities waiting for me. Like so many caregivers, I was thinking about what needed to happen next instead of focusing completely on the person standing in front of me.

When I walked into John's room, he greeted me with his usual warm smile. Together we gathered the clothes he had picked out for the day. I knew John well. I had helped him many times before, and I knew he was still capable of dressing himself. He might need a little encouragement or an occasional reminder, but if I gave him the time, he could put on his own shirt. That morning, however, I wasn't thinking about giving him time. I was thinking about staying on schedule.

Without much thought, I picked up his shirt and slipped one arm through the sleeve, then the other. I buttoned each button, straightened his collar, tucked in his shirt, smiled, and prepared to move on to the next task waiting for me. In my mind, I had done something kind. I had saved a few minutes, helped John get dressed, and kept the morning moving. It wasn't until much later that I realized I had missed something far more important than my schedule.

I hadn't simply helped John get dressed. I had taken away his opportunity to dress himself. What I stole from him wasn't just a task. It was a chance to feel capable. It was an opportunity to experience independence and to maintain control over something as personal as getting ready for the day. Without intending to, I had chosen efficiency over dignity. I had allowed my schedule to become more important than John's confidence, and that realization stayed with me long after that morning had passed.

As I reflected on what happened, I began to understand that my impatience had not come from selfishness. I genuinely wanted to help. Like so many caregivers, I believed I was making life easier for someone else. What I failed to recognize was that easier is not always better. Sometimes the greatest gift we can give another person is the opportunity to do something for themselves, even if it takes a little longer. There is something deeply meaningful about accomplishing an everyday task without someone stepping in too quickly. Those small victories remind people that they still have abilities, purpose, and value.

That experience completely changed the way I viewed caregiving. I realized that dignity is often preserved through the smallest moments of everyday life. We tend to think of dignity in terms of major decisions, but more often it is found in ordinary routines. It lives in buttoning a shirt, tying

a shoe, brushing your own hair, choosing what to wear, or pouring a cup of coffee. These simple acts may seem insignificant to someone rushing through the day, but they remind the person performing them that they are still participating in their own life. Every opportunity we preserve strengthens confidence. Every opportunity we take away too quickly can quietly diminish it.

Over the years, I have learned that patience is not about standing still or doing nothing. Patience is an active decision. It is choosing to slow down when everything inside you wants to hurry. It is believing that another person is capable of more than you may first assume. It is allowing room for mistakes because mistakes are often part of learning, growth, and maintaining independence. Patience asks us to trust the process rather than simply focusing on the outcome.

There are no shortcuts to becoming patient. I certainly did not become patient overnight. In many ways, my residents have been my greatest teachers. They taught me patience one experience at a time, usually after I recognized my own mistakes. Every time I rushed through a task, I learned something about myself. Every time I slowed down long enough to let someone succeed, I learned something about them. Those lessons shaped not only the caregiver I became but also the person I became.

As I continued growing in my faith, Scripture began speaking to these moments in new ways. Colossians 3:12 encourages us to clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. I have often noticed that patience is listed alongside humility. The two seem inseparable. Humility reminds me that my schedule is not always the most important thing in the room. Patience gives me the ability to live out that humility by slowing down enough to honor another person's dignity.

Proverbs 14:29 says, "Whoever is patient has great understanding." I have discovered the truth of those words throughout my career. Whenever I rushed, I usually missed something. I missed a smile, a concern, a quiet fear, or an opportunity to encourage someone. When I slowed down, however, I began noticing things I never would have seen otherwise. Patience gave me understanding because it forced me to pay attention. It reminded me that caregiving is not about completing tasks as quickly as possible. It is about seeing the person behind every task.

Even today, there are mornings when I catch myself wanting to rush ahead. Old habits have a way of resurfacing, especially when the day feels overwhelming. In those moments, I often think about John standing in his room, waiting patiently while I hurried through something he could have done himself. Remembering that morning helps me pause, take a breath, and choose a different approach. It reminds me that the people I care for are not interruptions to my schedule. They are the reason the schedule exists in the first place.

John probably never knew he became one of the greatest teachers of my career. He simply wanted to get dressed that morning. I walked into his room believing I was there to help him. Looking back now, I realize he was helping me become a better caregiver. Sometimes life's greatest lessons are found in the simplest moments, and sometimes all it takes to change the way you care for others is something as ordinary as a shirt.

Helen and Julia: Learning to Live in the Moment

One of the hardest lessons I have learned as a caregiver is that every day is different. Just because something worked yesterday does not mean it will work today. That can be difficult to accept because, like everyone else, I enjoy routines. When I find an activity that brings people together, creates laughter, and encourages engagement, I naturally want to keep doing it. It feels rewarding to watch people smile, connect with one another, and experience success. Those moments remind me why I chose this profession. However, caregiving has a way of reminding us that people are constantly changing, and if we are going to care for them well, we have to be willing to change with them.

I learned this lesson from two wonderful women named Helen and Julia. They both lived with dementia, but they had very different personalities. Despite their differences, they had formed a friendship that was fun to watch. Every day we would spend time together working on fill in the blank trivia. It was one of those activities that simply worked. They encouraged one another, laughed when they remembered an answer, teased each other when someone guessed incorrectly, and celebrated even the smallest successes. Those moments became part of our daily routine, and before long I looked forward to them as much as they did.

As caregivers, we love finding those moments. We spend so much of our time trying different activities, adjusting programs, and looking for ways to help people stay engaged that when something finally works, it feels like discovering a hidden treasure. I remember thinking that we had found something special. I assumed we would continue enjoying those afternoons for a long time.

Then one day everything changed.

We sat down with the trivia cards just like we always had. I asked the first question, expecting the usual smiles and conversation. Instead, one of the women stared quietly at the card. She looked confused. I tried another question, thinking perhaps it was simply a difficult one. The confusion only grew. I could see frustration replacing confidence. The activity that had once brought her joy was now reminding her of something she could no longer do.

Within moments, she became upset. She pushed her chair back, stood up, and walked away. I could see the embarrassment on her face. She wasn't angry with me. She wasn't trying to be difficult. She was grieving a loss that neither of us had expected to arrive that day.

As I watched her leave, I felt my own disappointment begin to surface. The routine I had grown to love was disappearing right in front of me. I wanted things to go back to the way they had been only the day before. I wanted the laughter to return. I wanted the activity to work the way it always had. Instead, I found myself sitting in silence with Julia, who was equally confused about why her friend had walked away.

That afternoon taught me something I have never forgotten. Sometimes the hardest part of caregiving is not watching another person's abilities change. The hardest part is accepting that our favorite ways of connecting may also need to change. It is tempting to hold on to what once worked because those memories bring us comfort. Unfortunately, dementia does not live in yesterday. It lives in today.

I realized that if I insisted on continuing the trivia game simply because it had always been successful, I would only create more frustration for everyone involved. My job was not to preserve the activity. My job was to preserve the relationship. That meant letting go of my own expectations and meeting each woman exactly where she was that day.

So we adapted.

Julia still enjoyed answering questions, so I found ways to continue engaging her. For her friend, I searched for something completely different, something that matched her abilities instead of reminding her of what she had lost. It wasn't the activity I had planned, but it was the activity she needed.

Looking back, I realize that flexibility is one of the greatest expressions of patience. Patience is not simply waiting for someone to finish a task. Patience is being willing to release our own expectations so another person can experience success. It means accepting that people change, abilities change, and sometimes the best thing we can do is change alongside them.

People have told me over the years that I am a patient person. I appreciate the compliment, but they usually do not see everything that happened before that patience became visible. They don't see the mistakes, the disappointments, the moments when I wanted things to be easier, or the times I had to stop, take a deep breath, and remind myself that the person in front of me was doing the very best they could.

Patience is not a personality trait that some people are born with and others are not. It is something that grows through experience. Every difficult moment gives us another opportunity to practice it. Every unexpected change teaches us to slow down, observe, and respond instead of react. Every challenge invites us to become a little more understanding than we were the day before.

I often think about the words of Colossians 3:12, where Paul encourages us to clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Those words have taken on new meaning throughout my caregiving journey. Patience is not about pretending change isn't happening. It is about responding to change with compassion instead of frustration. It is about recognizing that the person standing in front of us is doing the best they can with the abilities they have today.

Helen and Julia reminded me that caregiving is never about getting people to fit into my plans. It is about having the humility to step into their world, even when that world looks different than it did yesterday. When we learn to live in the moment with the people we care for, patience becomes less about waiting and more about loving them exactly where they are.

That lesson has stayed with me throughout my career. Every time I walk into a room, I try to leave yesterday behind. I remind myself that today is a new day with new opportunities, new challenges, and new possibilities. The person I cared for yesterday may not be the same person I care for today, and that is okay. My responsibility is not to recreate yesterday. My responsibility

is to be fully present today. When I do that, I discover that patience is no longer something I have to force. It becomes the bridge that allows genuine connection to grow, one moment at a time.

Just Being There

When I first began working as an activity assistant in a nursing home, I was excited, nervous, and completely unsure of myself. Looking back, I laugh because I thought I had to have all the answers before I could help anyone. I believed I needed the perfect activity, the perfect schedule, and the perfect plan to make a difference. What I didn't realize was that the residents weren't expecting perfection. They simply wanted someone who genuinely cared enough to spend time with them.

Those first few weeks were filled with uncertainty. Every day felt like a new lesson. I was learning the routines, trying to remember everyone's names, and figuring out what it meant to engage people living with dementia. There were moments when I questioned whether I belonged there at all. Fortunately, the residents and staff showed me far more patience than I showed myself. They gave me permission to learn through experience instead of expecting me to know everything from the very beginning.

One day, a nurse named Leo asked me to gather the residents into a circle. I happily did what he asked, arranging the chairs and helping everyone find a comfortable place to sit. When everyone was settled, I stood there wondering what came next. I had completed the assignment, but I had no idea how to turn a circle of residents into a meaningful activity.

Nurse Leo noticed my uncertainty and walked over with a smile. Instead of criticizing me or taking over, he quietly offered advice that has stayed with me for more than twenty-five years. He told me not to worry so much about the activity itself. "Spend time with them," he said. "Talk to them. Get to know them. Be patient. The activities will come later."

At the time, those words sounded almost too simple. I had been so focused on planning something entertaining that I had forgotten the most important part of my job was building relationships. From that day forward, I spent less time worrying about having the perfect program and more time sitting with people, listening to their stories, learning about their families, and discovering what made each person unique. Something remarkable happened. As I became more comfortable, the residents became more comfortable too. The circle grew larger because people wanted to be there. They weren't coming for a perfectly planned activity. They were coming because they knew someone cared enough to spend time with them.

Nurse Leo taught me that some of the most meaningful moments in caregiving happen when we stop trying so hard to do something and simply choose to be with someone.

One of the residents who helped reinforce that lesson was a remarkable woman named Catherine. Catherine was 101 years old and lived with dementia. She had a wonderful personality, but she also challenged me in ways I had never experienced before. Whenever I was nearby, she wanted my attention. If I walked into a room, she wanted me beside her. If I was leading an activity, she

wanted me sitting next to her. At first, I found it incredibly frustrating. I was responsible for an entire group of residents, yet Catherine seemed determined to keep me all to herself.

I have to admit there were days when I didn't understand her behavior. I wondered why she demanded so much of my attention. I questioned whether I was doing something wrong or whether there was a better way to handle the situation. Like many new caregivers, I focused on changing her behavior instead of trying to understand what was causing it.

Eventually, someone helped me see the situation differently. They explained that in Catherine's world, I reminded her of her husband. Dementia had changed the way she understood the people around her, and in her mind, I represented the person she trusted most. Suddenly, everything made sense.

That realization changed the way I cared for her.

Instead of trying to convince Catherine that her understanding was wrong, I learned to enter her world. I stopped correcting her and started comforting her. If sitting with her for a few extra minutes at lunch helped her feel safe, then those few minutes were well spent. If taking time to reassure her allowed me to better engage everyone else afterward, then it wasn't time wasted. It was time invested in building trust.

Did I still become frustrated sometimes? Absolutely. There were days when I felt like pulling my hair out because caregiving can be emotionally exhausting. There were moments when I wondered whether I was handling things the right way. Yet every difficult interaction with Catherine taught me another lesson about patience. She reminded me that people living with dementia are not trying to make life difficult for us. They are doing the very best they can with the reality they are experiencing.

The more I accepted that, the more peaceful our time together became. I discovered that caregiving is often less about changing another person's behavior and more about changing my own perspective. Catherine didn't need me to fix her reality. She needed me to step into it with compassion. Once I learned to do that, our relationship changed completely.

When I think about Catherine today, I don't remember the interruptions or the moments of frustration nearly as much as I remember the privilege of walking beside her during that season of her life. She reminded me that presence is often more powerful than productivity. Sometimes people don't need us to solve a problem or create the perfect activity. Sometimes they simply need to know they are not alone.

Philippians 4:6 and 7 has become one of the Scriptures I return to whenever caregiving feels overwhelming: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." Those words remind me that I was never expected to carry every burden by myself. God invites us to bring our worries to Him and trust that His peace will sustain us, even on the most difficult days.

Over the years, I have also come to appreciate the wisdom found in Galatians 6:2: "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." Caregiving was never meant to be a journey we walk alone. We need one another. We need coworkers who encourage us, friends who understand us, family members who support us, and fellow caregivers who remind us that it is okay to ask for help.

Looking back, I realize that Catherine wasn't just teaching me patience. She was teaching me presence. She showed me that the greatest gift I could offer another person was not a perfectly planned activity or a perfectly organized schedule. It was my willingness to slow down, enter her world, and simply be there. That lesson has shaped every chapter of my caregiving journey, and it continues to remind me that some of the most meaningful moments in life happen not because we did something extraordinary, but because we chose to stay when someone needed us most.

Testing Patience to the Max During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Nothing in my twenty-five years of caregiving prepared me for the COVID-19 pandemic. Looking back, it still feels like a season suspended in time. One day our community was full of life. Families visited every day, volunteers stopped by to help with activities, musicians filled the halls with familiar songs, and residents gathered together for meals, games, and conversations. Then, almost overnight, everything changed.

The hallways became quieter than I had ever experienced. Doors that were once open remained closed. Family visits suddenly stopped, not because people didn't care, but because they weren't allowed inside. Residents who looked forward to seeing their children and grandchildren found themselves waving through windows or trying to understand video calls that made little sense to them. For those living with dementia, the changes were especially heartbreaking. They couldn't understand why everyone was suddenly wearing masks or why the people they loved had disappeared. Every day we patiently answered the same questions, knowing that only a few minutes later we would answer them again.

The work changed just as quickly. Policies seemed to change every week, sometimes every day, and occasionally several times in the same day. We were constantly adapting to new procedures while trying to provide comfort during one of the most frightening times our residents had ever experienced. The routines that had brought people security disappeared overnight. We had to become creative, finding new ways to celebrate birthdays, organize activities, and help residents feel connected in a world that suddenly felt isolated.

Like caregivers everywhere, I often felt emotionally exhausted. We were asked to do more with fewer staff, fewer resources, and very little time to catch our breath. I watched coworkers reach their breaking point. Some left healthcare altogether because they simply had nothing left to give. Those of us who stayed kept showing up each day because the residents were depending on us. We didn't always feel strong. In fact, there were many days when we felt completely drained. We showed up anyway because that is what caregivers do.

As difficult as those days were professionally, they also became one of the darkest seasons of my life spiritually. Until then, my faith had always been a steady source of strength. During the

pandemic, however, I found myself wrestling with questions I had never faced before. I struggled to understand why so many people were suffering, why families were separated from loved ones during some of the most important moments of their lives, and why the future seemed so uncertain. Churches closed their doors, familiar routines disappeared, and even the places where I normally found comfort felt distant. There were days when I felt emotionally empty, spiritually exhausted, and unsure of what tomorrow would bring.

Looking back now, I realize I wasn't losing my faith. I was discovering what faith looks like when there are no easy answers. Faith became less about certainty and more about choosing to trust God one day at a time. Some mornings, simply walking back into the building and caring for the residents was an act of faith. I didn't have all the answers, but I believed they still deserved compassion, kindness, and hope, even during the darkest days.

One lesson from the pandemic has stayed with me ever since. It is easy to believe we are carrying the heaviest burden until we stop and consider what everyone else is carrying. Families were grieving from a distance. Residents were experiencing loneliness unlike anything they had ever known. Coworkers were quietly battling exhaustion while worrying about their own loved ones at home. Every person I encountered was carrying a burden I couldn't fully see.

Romans 12:15 became more meaningful to me than ever before: "Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn." During the pandemic there wasn't much rejoicing, but there was certainly plenty of mourning. That Scripture reminded me that my calling was not to fix every problem. My calling was to be present. Sometimes the greatest gift I could offer was simply sitting beside someone, listening to them, and reminding them they were not facing those difficult moments alone.

As painful as that season was, it reshaped the way I think about caregiving and about caring for myself. Before COVID, I often believed I could keep pushing through exhaustion and rest later. The pandemic taught me that caregivers are not limitless. If we continually pour ourselves out without allowing others to care for us, eventually there is nothing left to give. I also watched something encouraging emerge from those difficult years. Caregivers began talking more openly about burnout, mental health, asking for help, and setting healthy boundaries. We slowly began recognizing that taking care of ourselves is not selfish. It is essential if we hope to continue caring for others.

When I think back on those years, I certainly remember the fear and uncertainty, but I also remember remarkable acts of compassion. I remember coworkers encouraging one another after long shifts, celebrating birthdays in creative ways, helping residents connect with loved ones however we could, and refusing to let isolation steal every moment of joy. Even during one of the darkest chapters of my career, kindness continued to shine through.

The COVID-19 pandemic tested my patience more than any other season of my life, but it also deepened my faith, strengthened my compassion, and reminded me why I became a caregiver in the first place. If you cared for someone during those difficult years, I hope you know this: what you carried mattered. The sacrifices you made mattered. The tears you shed mattered. The quiet

moments when you stayed a little longer, listened a little more, or simply held someone's hand when no family could be there mattered more than you may ever realize.

History will remember the pandemic, but many of the greatest acts of love that happened during those years will never appear in history books. They happened quietly in nursing homes, hospitals, private homes, churches, and communities where caregivers simply kept showing up. Looking back, I believe that is what patience truly looks like. It is not simply waiting for difficult times to pass. It is choosing to love faithfully, even when the road ahead is uncertain, trusting that God is walking beside us every step of the way.

IV Chapter 5

Being Yourself

When I first started working in activities, I thought the best caregivers were the ones who could entertain everyone. I imagined they were always energetic, always smiling, always talking, and always able to walk into a room and instantly capture everyone's attention. As I watched experienced activity professionals, I found myself wondering if I measured up. I wasn't naturally loud or outgoing. I enjoyed conversations more than performances, and I found just as much joy sitting beside one resident listening to their story as I did leading a room full of people. For a while, I worried that maybe I wasn't the right personality for the job.

The longer I worked with older adults, the more I realized something important. The residents weren't looking for a performance. They were looking for a relationship. They didn't need me to become someone I wasn't. They simply needed me to care enough to spend time with them. That realization changed everything.

I began to stop comparing myself to other activity directors and started paying attention to the way I naturally connected with people. I discovered I loved telling stories, asking questions, and learning about someone's life. I enjoyed sitting with people over a cup of coffee, laughing together during a game, or helping someone remember a favorite memory from years ago. Those moments weren't flashy, but they were genuine. I learned that authenticity builds trust much faster than pretending to be someone else.

Over the years, I even noticed how small things affected the way residents responded to me. Something as simple as the length of my hair would spark comments. If I let it grow a little longer than usual, residents would ask if I was feeling okay or tell me I needed a haircut. At first I thought it was funny, but eventually I realized they were paying far more attention than I ever imagined. They knew me. They noticed changes. Those little conversations reminded me that relationships are built through hundreds of small interactions, not just the big memorable moments.

One experience that reinforced this lesson happened while my wife, Amy, and I were taking a Disney Cruise. Anyone who has sailed with Disney knows the cruise directors are part of the magic. From early in the morning until late at night, they are full of energy, enthusiasm, laughter, and encouragement. They seem to know every activity happening on the ship while somehow making thousands of guests feel welcome. It looks effortless, but because of my own career, I knew exactly how much work was happening behind the scenes.

One afternoon I stepped into an elevator, and the cruise director stepped in beside me. She greeted everyone with the same excitement she had shown all week. After introducing myself, I mentioned that I worked as an activity director in senior living. She smiled immediately and told me that before joining Disney Cruise Line, she had also been an activity director. In that instant,

we recognized something familiar in each other. We both understood what it felt like to spend an entire day taking care of other people's experiences.

As the elevator doors closed, I smiled and quietly said, "If you need a few seconds to stop being the cruise director and just be yourself, this elevator is a safe place."

She looked at me for a moment, and almost instantly her shoulders relaxed. The smile she had been wearing for the guests softened into a genuine smile. She let out a deep breath and quietly said, "Thank you. I needed that."

It was only a few seconds before the elevator reached its destination, but I have never forgotten that moment. Throughout the rest of the cruise, we would occasionally pass each other around the ship. She always smiled and waved, and I did the same. We never needed another conversation because we both understood something that is difficult to explain unless you have lived it. Sometimes the people who spend their lives creating joy for others simply need permission to stop performing for a moment and just be human.

That brief encounter reminded me of something I had been learning throughout my own career. Caregivers spend so much time taking care of everyone else that we sometimes forget to care for ourselves. We become so accustomed to being the encourager, the helper, the listener, and the problem solver that we rarely give ourselves permission to simply breathe. Sometimes the greatest gift another caregiver can offer is not advice or solutions. Sometimes it is simply creating a space where someone feels safe enough to let their guard down.

Another lesson about authenticity came during one of the most difficult seasons of my career. In the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, I was trying to hire an activity assistant for our assisted living community. Staffing shortages were affecting healthcare everywhere, and finding the right person seemed nearly impossible. Every interview felt like another reminder of how difficult those days had become.

One afternoon, my administrator approached me with a candidate she believed would be an excellent fit. She explained that the applicant was on the autism spectrum and had previously worked with adults with developmental disabilities. She also shared that she would personally help support the new employee as she learned the position. I trusted my administrator completely, so we scheduled the interview.

Hiring her turned out to be one of the best decisions I ever made.

I have always been honest about the fact that arts and crafts have never been my greatest strength. I enjoy conversations, storytelling, music, and group interaction far more than creating elaborate craft projects. Our new activity assistant, however, had an incredible gift. She was creative, organized, dependable, and passionate about arts and crafts. She developed beautiful programs that residents loved and consistently brought ideas to the department that I never would have imagined on my own. She didn't simply fill an open position. She made our entire activity department better.

I remember telling my administrator that if I could hire ten more activity assistants just like her, I would do it without hesitation. That experience reminded me how often we underestimate people because we focus on labels instead of gifts. Every person has strengths. Sometimes leadership simply means creating an environment where those strengths can flourish.

As I reflect on these experiences, I often think about Jesus' words in Matthew 22:39: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Loving others begins with seeing them as individuals, each created with unique gifts, personalities, and experiences. It also means accepting ourselves the same way. God never asked me to become someone else before serving others. He simply asked me to love people faithfully with the personality and gifts He had already given me.

Looking back over my career, I spent too much time trying to become the caregiver I thought everyone expected me to be. Eventually, the residents taught me something much more valuable. They didn't need another entertainer. They didn't need another polished professional. They didn't need someone pretending to have all the answers. They simply needed someone who would show up, listen, laugh with them, cry with them, and genuinely care.

That may be one of the greatest lessons caregiving has ever taught me. The best caregivers are not remembered because they were the loudest people in the room. They are remembered because they made people feel seen, valued, and loved. I have worked with incredible caregivers whose personalities could fill an auditorium and others whose quiet presence brought peace into every room they entered. There is no single personality that makes someone a great caregiver.

The greatest caregivers are simply the ones who have the courage to be themselves.

And somewhere along the way, I discovered that was enough.

My Years with Betsy

I honestly can't remember exactly how many years Betsy and I spent together. When you work in memory care, time has a way of blending together. Days become weeks, weeks become years, and before you know it, someone who was once a new resident has become part of your everyday life. Looking back, I realize I wasn't simply caring for Betsy. We were walking through a season of life together, and along the way she became one of my greatest teachers.

It would have been easy for people to describe Betsy simply as a woman living with dementia, but that description barely scratched the surface of who she really was. Before dementia entered her life, Betsy had been a daughter, a wife, a mother, a friend, and a coworker. She had celebrated birthdays and holidays, laughed until she cried, experienced heartbreak, raised a family, and created a lifetime of memories. Dementia changed how she communicated those experiences, but it never erased the person she had always been.

One thing about Betsy never changed. She loved people.

She was an extrovert in every sense of the word. She wanted conversation. She wanted attention. She wanted to know what was happening, who was coming into the room, and whether someone

had a few minutes to spend with her. On busy days, I have to admit, that could be exhausting. There were times when I would see Betsy coming toward me while my mind was already thinking about five other things that needed to be done. Early in my career, I sometimes viewed those interruptions as obstacles keeping me from finishing my work.

Eventually I realized something that changed the way I cared for her.

Betsy wasn't interrupting my work.

She was my work.

Once I understood that, everything else began to change. Instead of asking myself how quickly I could move on to the next task, I began asking what Betsy needed in that moment. Sometimes she wanted to talk. Sometimes she wanted someone to sit beside her. Sometimes she simply wanted reassurance that someone noticed she was there. The answer wasn't always the same because Betsy wasn't the same every day.

That was one of the greatest lessons she taught me.

There is no perfect caregiving formula.

What worked beautifully on Monday might not work at all on Tuesday. Some mornings Betsy was full of laughter and ready to join every activity we offered. Other days she seemed anxious or restless, and the things that had always brought her joy suddenly held no interest at all. Dementia constantly reminded me that flexibility is just as important as preparation.

There were certainly days when my patience wore thin. I would step out of the room for a few minutes, take a deep breath, collect my thoughts, and remind myself that Betsy wasn't trying to make my day more difficult. She was navigating a world that no longer made complete sense to her. Every time I walked back into the room, I had another opportunity to begin again. Sometimes I sat quietly beside her without saying a word. Other times we laughed together, reminisced, or redirected our attention to something completely different. Every interaction taught me a little more about her and a little more about myself.

Some of my favorite memories with Betsy weren't part of an activity calendar. They happened during ordinary moments. They happened while walking down the hallway, sitting together before lunch, or sharing a conversation that may not have made sense to anyone else listening. Those moments reminded me that meaningful engagement isn't always found in elaborate programs. Often it grows through consistency, trust, and simply showing up day after day.

There were also days when caring for Betsy required more of me than I thought I had to give. Sometimes I stayed longer than I planned because she needed reassurance. Sometimes I changed my entire schedule because she needed someone to simply be present. There were moments when I questioned whether I was making any difference at all. Then Betsy would look at me with a smile, quietly thank me, or reach for my hand, and suddenly I was reminded why I had chosen

this work in the first place. Those simple moments carried more meaning than any award or recognition I have ever received.

Betsy also taught me something important about humility. There were many times when I didn't know the best way to help her. Rather than pretending I had all the answers, I learned to ask questions. I leaned on nurses, nursing assistants, social workers, therapists, family members, and fellow activity professionals. Someone almost always had an idea I hadn't considered or an insight that helped me understand Betsy a little better. Caregiving was never meant to be a journey we travel alone, and Betsy reminded me of that again and again.

When I think about those years, I often remember Jesus' words in Matthew 25:40: "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me." For a long time, I thought that verse was simply about serving others. Today I hear something even deeper. Every time I sat beside Betsy, listened to her stories, offered reassurance, or patiently entered her world, I wasn't simply completing another task. I was participating in something sacred. Caring for another human being is one of the greatest privileges God gives us.

Romans 12 reminds us to love sincerely and to honor one another above ourselves. Betsy lived those verses in a way I never expected. She taught me that sincere love isn't measured by grand gestures. It is measured by consistency. It is choosing to come back tomorrow after a difficult day today. It is refusing to give up on someone simply because the journey has become harder. It is showing up again and again because every person deserves to know they are seen, valued, and loved.

Looking back now, I realize Betsy shaped me every bit as much as I helped care for her. She taught me to look beyond a diagnosis and see the person. She taught me that patience grows through practice, compassion grows through understanding, and genuine relationships are built one ordinary moment at a time. I walked into memory care believing I was there to teach activities and provide engagement. Years later, I left realizing that Betsy had been teaching me all along.

For that gift, I will always be grateful.

Get Some Rest to Engage Better

For years, I convinced myself that being tired was simply part of being a caregiver.

I accepted it as normal. Early mornings, long days, restless nights, and the emotional weight of caring for others became my routine. Like so many caregivers, I believed I could simply push through the exhaustion. There was always one more resident to visit, one more activity to plan, one more family to comfort, and one more problem to solve. Rest could wait. At least, that's what I kept telling myself.

The problem was that my body eventually stopped agreeing with me.

While working in memory care, I found myself constantly exhausted. I wasn't just physically tired. I was mentally and emotionally drained. There were mornings when I woke up feeling as though I had never gone to sleep at all. I would drive to work already looking forward to the moment I could take a nap later that afternoon. Coffee became less about enjoying a morning routine and more about trying to survive the day.

At first, I ignored the warning signs. I told myself everyone in healthcare was tired. Everyone was working hard. Everyone was making sacrifices. What made me any different?

But eventually I noticed something that bothered me even more than being exhausted.

I wasn't showing up as the caregiver I wanted to be.

My patience became shorter. I found it harder to concentrate during conversations. Activities that normally brought me joy suddenly felt like another item on my to do list. I still loved the residents, but I no longer had the emotional energy to give them my very best every single day. That realization hurt because I knew they deserved better than a caregiver who was simply trying to make it to the end of the shift.

One day I finally admitted something I had been avoiding.

I couldn't continue caring well for others while completely ignoring my own needs.

That realization changed the way I viewed self care forever.

Instead of treating sleep as something I would get after everything else was finished, I began treating it like one of the most important responsibilities I had. I created a bedtime routine. I paid attention to what helped me relax and what kept my mind racing. Eventually, I even completed a sleep study because I wanted to understand why I felt so exhausted all the time. I stopped viewing sleep as a luxury and started seeing it as an investment in the people I cared for.

The difference surprised me.

As I began getting better rest, I noticed changes I hadn't expected. My mind felt clearer. I smiled more. My patience returned. I became more creative during activities, more present during conversations, and more attentive to the needs of the residents around me. I wasn't simply less tired. I was becoming the caregiver I wanted to be again.

Looking back now, I realize that sleep wasn't just helping me feel better. It was helping me engage better.

The residents deserved a caregiver who was fully present, not someone who was simply surviving the day.

That experience also changed the way I encouraged families. So many caregivers feel guilty when they admit they are tired. They apologize for needing rest as though exhaustion is

something to be ashamed of. I understand that feeling because I lived it myself. The truth is that our bodies were never designed to run without stopping. Rest isn't something we earn after we've done enough. Rest is one of the ways God equips us to continue caring for others.

Psalm 127:2 has become one of my favorite reminders: "In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat—for he grants sleep to those he loves." For years I read those words without truly appreciating them. Today I hear something different. Sleep is not a reward for finishing every task. It is one of God's gifts to His children.

I also think about Jesus' invitation in Matthew 11:28: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." Jesus never promised that caring for others would be easy. He simply promised that we would not have to carry every burden alone. Even Jesus stepped away from the crowds to rest, pray, and renew His strength. If the Son of God recognized the need for rest, perhaps I should stop pretending that I can live without it.

One of the greatest myths caregivers believe is that taking care of themselves somehow takes away from the people they love. I have learned the exact opposite is true. Every hour of healthy sleep, every quiet moment to recharge, and every decision to care for myself has made me a more patient, compassionate, and attentive caregiver.

Today I no longer feel guilty for protecting my rest. I understand that taking care of myself is one of the ways I take care of others. When I am rested, I listen better. I laugh more easily. I notice the small things. I have the patience to slow down and truly be present.

If there is one lesson I wish someone had taught me much earlier in my career, it is this.

You cannot pour from an empty cup.

Getting some rest is not selfish.

It may be one of the most loving things you ever do for the people who depend on you.

Tools to Get Better at Engaging

Looking back, I never imagined that one conversation with my parents would eventually shape the direction of my life and ministry.

In 2016, my parents came to me with a simple question. My grandmother, Flo, had begun showing signs of dementia, and they wanted help. Like so many family caregivers, they loved her deeply, but they weren't sure how to connect with her anymore. The conversations weren't the same. Activities she had once enjoyed no longer seemed to interest her. They wanted to do the right thing, but they weren't sure what that looked like.

They weren't asking me to fix dementia.

They were asking me how to continue loving my grandmother well.

Because of my years working in memory care, I began sharing ideas that I had learned from caring for hundreds of people living with dementia. Instead of thinking about what activities I liked, I encouraged them to think about what mattered to Grandma Flo. What had always brought her joy? What felt familiar? What helped her feel successful instead of frustrated?

At the time, I didn't realize I was describing what we now call person centered care. To me, it was simply common sense. Every person is different, so every approach should be different too. What works beautifully for one person may not work at all for someone else.

As Grandma Flo's dementia progressed, we learned that together.

In the early stages, she enjoyed simple household tasks. Folding towels, sorting familiar objects, and organizing small items gave her a sense of purpose because they connected with things she had done throughout her life. Later, those activities became more difficult, and we began introducing sensory items she could hold in her hands. Soft textures, fidget tools, comforting objects, and familiar music helped calm her anxiety and gave her something meaningful to focus on.

Every stage required us to adjust.

Every stage required us to learn something new.

Most importantly, every stage reminded me that the goal was never the activity itself. The goal was helping Grandma Flo feel safe, successful, and loved.

That experience changed the way I looked at caregiving forever.

I began realizing how many families simply didn't know these resources existed. They weren't failing as caregivers. They just didn't know what tools were available to help them. Over the years I met countless sons, daughters, spouses, and friends who told me the same thing after learning about engagement resources.

"I wish someone had told me this years ago."

Every time I heard those words, I wondered how many caregivers were struggling simply because no one had shared practical ideas with them. There are so many wonderful resources available today, from personalized music playlists and memory books to sensory blankets, fidget items, adaptive games, conversation cards, picture books, and countless other tools designed to meet people exactly where they are. None of those resources replace love, but they often create opportunities for love to be expressed in meaningful ways.

As I continued learning, I also discovered something important about myself. I didn't have all the answers, and I never would. Some of the best ideas I have ever used came from nurses, therapists, nursing assistants, family members, volunteers, fellow activity professionals, and

caregivers who were simply willing to share what had worked for them. Caregiving is one of the few professions where we become stronger by learning from one another.

That lesson continues to shape my life today.

When people ask me about engagement, they are often looking for one perfect activity that will solve every problem. I always smile because I know it doesn't exist. What does exist is something much better. We can continue learning. We can continue asking questions. We can keep adding new tools to our toolbox so that when one approach no longer works, another one is ready.

Every tool is simply another way of saying to someone, "You matter enough for me to keep trying."

First Peter 3:8 reminds us, "Finally, all of you, be like minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble." Those words have become a foundation for the way I think about caregiving. Learning new techniques is not about becoming a better expert. It is about becoming a more compassionate person. Every new idea, every resource, and every strategy is another opportunity to love someone more effectively.

Grandma Flo never knew how much she would influence my life. She probably never imagined that her journey with dementia would inspire me to keep learning, keep teaching, and keep encouraging other caregivers. Looking back now, I realize that she gave me far more than I ever gave her. She reminded me that caregiving is not about having all the answers. It is about loving people enough to keep learning, keep adapting, and keep showing up.

The greatest tool any caregiver will ever have is not found in a catalog or on a store shelf.

It is a heart that never stops learning how to love the person in front of them.

Chapter 6

Engaging with Expressive Behaviors

One afternoon, I was walking through the memory care neighborhood when I noticed a resident standing quietly at the window. She looked anxious as she stared out toward the road, watching a school bus pull up nearby. Her face reflected genuine concern, and before I could even ask what was wrong, she looked at me and said, "I have to get my children. The school bus is here."

I looked out the window and saw children climbing off the bus and running toward their homes. To me, it was simply another afternoon. To her, it was much more than that. She wasn't watching someone else's children. She was waiting for her own. I knew her children had been adults for many years. They had families of their own and lives far removed from elementary school. Years earlier, I probably would have gently corrected her and reminded her that her children were grown. I would have thought I was helping by bringing her back to reality. Experience had taught me something much more important. The facts were not what mattered most in that moment. The feelings were.

Instead of correcting her, I walked over and stood beside her. I quietly asked, "Tell me about your children." Almost immediately, her expression began to soften. She smiled as she told me stories about waiting for the school bus, helping with homework, making after-school snacks, and hearing little feet running through the front door each afternoon. As she talked, it became clear that she wasn't really worried about the children getting off the bus. She was reliving one of the most meaningful seasons of her life. The school bus hadn't confused her. It had awakened the memories and emotions of being a mother. What she needed wasn't correction. She needed someone willing to enter that moment with her.

That afternoon completely changed the way I viewed expressive behaviors. Before working in memory care, I assumed behaviors happened because dementia caused confusion. Over the years, I came to understand that many behaviors are actually a form of communication. People living with Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia continue to experience emotions long after many of their memories begin to fade. They may no longer remember names, dates, or recent conversations, but they still experience love, fear, grief, loneliness, joy, and hope. Those emotions often remain remarkably strong. Sometimes a familiar song, a particular smell, the changing seasons, or something as simple as a passing school bus awakens feelings that have been tucked away for decades.

As caregivers, we often see the behavior first. We see someone becoming anxious, angry, tearful, or restless, and our instinct is to stop the behavior as quickly as possible. Caring for people like this taught me to ask a different question. Instead of asking, "How do I stop this?" I learned to ask, "What is this person trying to tell me?" That single question changed the way I approached almost every challenging situation.

Sometimes the answer was physical. A resident might be experiencing pain, hunger, fatigue, or discomfort but lack the words to explain it. Other times the answer was emotional. A familiar object reminded someone of a spouse they deeply missed. A holiday brought back memories of loss. A loud noise triggered fear from an experience years earlier. Sometimes there was no obvious explanation at all, and I had to become a detective, paying close attention to everything happening around the person. What had they just seen? What had they heard? Had the environment changed? Was there something in their past that might explain what they were feeling now? The longer I worked in memory care, the more I realized that behaviors rarely happened without a reason. The reason simply wasn't always visible.

Getting to know a person's life story became one of the most valuable tools I had as a caregiver. Medical records could tell me about diagnoses and medications, but they couldn't tell me about someone's first job, the loss of a spouse, military service, favorite hobbies, cherished traditions, or the people they loved most. Those pieces of a person's story often explained far more than any chart ever could. The diagnosis helped me understand the disease. Their life helped me understand the person.

James 1:19 became one of the Scriptures I returned to often during those moments: "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry." Those words perfectly describe what caregiving requires. My first responsibility was not to correct someone or convince them they were mistaken. My first responsibility was to listen. Even when the words didn't make logical sense, the emotions almost always did. Validation does not mean agreeing with something that isn't true. It means acknowledging that the person's feelings are real. If someone is frightened, I can reassure them. If someone is grieving, I can honor their sadness. If someone is worried, I can help them feel safe without arguing about the facts. When people feel heard, they often begin to relax because someone has taken the time to understand what they are experiencing.

Over the years, I discovered that listening often accomplished far more than correcting ever could. Some of the most meaningful moments I experienced with residents happened because I stopped trying to fix the situation and instead chose to sit quietly beside someone, allowing them to tell their story in whatever way they were able. Sometimes that meant listening to memories that had become tangled together. Sometimes it meant holding a hand without saying very much at all. Whatever the situation, those moments reminded me that caregiving is not about controlling another person's emotions. It is about walking beside them with patience, compassion, and respect.

When I think back to that afternoon at the window, I no longer remember the anxiety on the woman's face nearly as much as I remember the love she had for her children. That was the real story unfolding before me. Dementia had changed how she expressed that love, but it had not taken it away. Caring for her reminded me that every expressive behavior has a story behind it. Sometimes it is a story of love. Sometimes it is a story of grief, fear, or longing. Our job as caregivers is not to silence those stories. Our job is to listen carefully enough to understand them.

That may be one of the greatest lessons caregiving has ever taught me. When we slow down long enough to look beyond the behavior and see the person, everything begins to change. Trust

grows, fear begins to fade, and genuine connection becomes possible. Every behavior tells a story, and when we have the patience to listen, we often discover that the story is far more important than the behavior itself.

Sundowning

Ralph was one of those residents you never forgot. He lived in the memory care neighborhood where I worked outside Philadelphia, and from the day I met him, I knew he was someone special. Dementia had taken many of his memories, but it had never taken away his personality. Ralph knew exactly who he was, even when he couldn't always remember where he was.

He loved dressing up. Most days he wore a suit and tie, and he rarely went anywhere without his fedora. It wasn't unusual to hear him quietly singing Frank Sinatra or another Rat Pack favorite as he walked through the halls. He carried himself with the confidence and charm of another generation. Whenever I saw Ralph, I couldn't help but smile. He was a crooner through and through.

As much as I enjoyed seeing Ralph during the day, I also knew that evenings could become difficult for him. As the afternoon faded into evening, especially during the winter months when darkness arrived much earlier, something began to change. Ralph became restless. He paced the neighborhood, walked the hallways, and seemed increasingly anxious. The staff learned to pay close attention during those hours because we knew his behavior often changed as the sunlight disappeared.

At first, I didn't fully understand what was happening. Like many caregivers, I simply noticed that some residents became more confused or agitated later in the day. Over time, I learned about a phenomenon known as sundowning. Many people living with Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia experience increased confusion, anxiety, restlessness, or behavioral changes as daylight fades into evening. No one knows exactly why it happens, but it is very real for the people experiencing it.

One afternoon, I was leading our weekly bingo game. Residents gathered around the tables while I stood behind the rolling cart that held the bingo cage. Ralph walked by, looked at the group, and announced loud enough for everyone to hear that crooners don't play bingo. Everyone laughed because that was exactly the kind of thing Ralph would say. He continued pacing the neighborhood while the game carried on.

Then, without warning, everything changed.

In an instant, Ralph turned and came running toward me. Before I had time to react, he attempted to leap over the bingo cart holding the bingo cage. Staff immediately responded. Calmly and professionally, we moved in to protect Ralph and everyone around him. Within moments the situation was under control, but my heart continued racing long afterward.

That afternoon stayed with me.

It reminded me that sundowning is not simply a word found in a textbook. It is something very real that caregivers witness every day. Ralph wasn't trying to be disruptive. He wasn't choosing to frighten anyone. He was responding to a world that no longer made sense to him as the light around him changed. His brain was processing the environment differently than mine, and his behavior reflected the confusion and anxiety he was experiencing.

That experience taught me to become much more intentional about the late afternoon and evening hours. Rather than waiting for behaviors to appear, our team learned to prepare for them. We tried to maintain consistent routines because familiarity often brought comfort. We encouraged meaningful activity earlier in the day so residents stayed engaged and awake, while evenings became quieter and more peaceful. Soft music often replaced louder activities. Lights were adjusted before the unit became too dark. Conversations became calmer. Sometimes simply sitting beside someone or taking a quiet walk together helped reduce anxiety before it had the chance to grow.

I also learned to pay attention to the little things. Was someone taking long naps during the day? Were they hungry, uncomfortable, or overstimulated? Had the television been playing loudly for hours? Small changes sometimes made a remarkable difference. Every person experienced sundowning differently, and what worked for one resident might not work for another. Once again, caregiving reminded me that there is never a single solution that fits everyone.

When families asked me about sundowning, I encouraged them to talk with their physician if sleep continued to be a struggle. Sometimes there were medical issues contributing to poor sleep, and occasionally treatments or medications could help. More often than anything else, however, I encouraged them to focus on creating calm, predictable routines that helped their loved one feel safe as evening approached.

Looking back now, I rarely remember Ralph for the frightening moment at the bingo cart. Instead, I remember his fedora, his Sinatra songs, his sharp suit, and the smile that appeared whenever someone recognized the gentleman he had always been. Dementia changed many things about Ralph, but it never changed his worth. Even during his most difficult moments, he deserved patience, dignity, and compassion.

Ecclesiastes 3:1 reminds us, "There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens." I often think about those words when I remember Ralph. Every day brought different seasons for him. Some hours were filled with laughter and music. Others were marked by confusion and anxiety. My responsibility as a caregiver was not to control every season but to faithfully walk beside him through each one.

Ralph taught me that some of the most challenging moments in caregiving are also opportunities to extend the greatest compassion. When we understand that behaviors are often expressions of fear rather than acts of defiance, our response begins to change. We become slower to judge, quicker to reassure, and more willing to meet people where they are. That is what Ralph needed from me, and I am grateful he taught me that lesson. Even today, whenever I hear a Frank Sinatra song, I still picture Ralph in his fedora, quietly singing as he walked the halls, reminding me that every person deserves to be seen for who they are, not simply for the disease they live with.

Engaging with Tears

One of the hardest things I have ever learned as a caregiver was realizing that not every tear needs to be stopped.

Early in my career, whenever someone began to cry, my first instinct was to fix whatever was wrong. I wanted to cheer them up, distract them, or find the perfect words to make the sadness disappear. Watching another person cry made me uncomfortable because I cared about them. I believed that if I was doing my job well, I should be able to make them feel better.

Experience taught me something very different.

I have sat beside many people as they cried. Some cried quietly with tears slowly rolling down their cheeks. Others sobbed so deeply that words would no longer come. Some could explain exactly why they were crying. Others simply couldn't. Dementia had taken away their ability to explain what they were feeling, but it had not taken away the emotions themselves.

Those moments taught me that tears are often another form of communication.

Whenever someone began crying, I learned to become a detective instead of a problem solver. I quietly asked myself what might be happening beneath the surface. Was the person in pain? Were they frightened? Were they trying to tell me something but no longer had the words? Had they suddenly remembered someone they loved? Were they lonely, tired, or overwhelmed? Sometimes there was an obvious reason. Many times there wasn't.

I also learned that not every tear has an emotional cause. Occasionally, frequent or uncontrollable crying can be related to medical conditions such as Pseudobulbar Affect, often called PBA, which causes sudden episodes of crying or laughing because of changes in the brain. When crying becomes frequent or seems out of character, it is important to speak with a physician so medical concerns can be properly evaluated. As caregivers, we should never assume every behavior is simply part of dementia.

Most of the time, however, what people needed from me wasn't an answer.

They needed my presence.

I stopped trying to fill every quiet moment with words. Sometimes I simply sat beside someone and held their hand. Sometimes I offered a tissue and waited. Sometimes I gently rubbed their shoulder or quietly reminded them that they were not alone. I discovered that silence can be one of the most compassionate gifts we offer another person. It gives people permission to feel what they are feeling without rushing them toward a different emotion.

There were certainly moments when I felt helpless. As caregivers, we naturally want to protect the people we love from pain. We want to make everything better. But caregiving has taught me that some hurts cannot be fixed. They can only be shared. There is something deeply meaningful

about choosing to stay with someone through their tears instead of trying to make them stop crying.

Over the years, I also learned to pay attention to my own emotions. There were days when I was tired, stressed, or emotionally drained, and someone else's tears felt almost overwhelming. Those were the moments when I had to remind myself why I was there. The person crying wasn't trying to make my day harder. They were simply expressing something they could no longer explain. Keeping my own emotions in check allowed me to become a calming presence instead of adding more anxiety to an already difficult moment.

Romans 12:15 says, "Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn." Those words have become one of my favorite descriptions of caregiving. Sometimes our greatest act of compassion is not solving a problem but entering someone else's sorrow with them. We don't have to carry it away. We simply have to let them know they don't have to carry it alone.

Looking back, I no longer see tears as something to fear or avoid. I see them as invitations. They invite us to slow down, to listen more carefully, and to offer comfort before conversation. Tears remind us that even when words disappear, emotions remain. They remind us that every person longs to be seen, heard, and understood.

Some of the most meaningful moments of my career happened while sitting quietly beside someone who was crying. We didn't always have long conversations. We didn't always solve the problem. But we shared something just as important. We shared the moment.

Those moments taught me that love is not always measured by the words we speak. Sometimes love is simply staying long enough for someone to know they are not alone.

Silence Is Golden

One of the biggest lessons I learned in memory care came from a family member who wasn't asking me to do more.

He was asking me to do less.

One afternoon, a son approached me and asked if we could talk. As the activity director, I had made it my mission to engage residents, encourage conversation, and create opportunities for people to connect. I loved bringing people together, and I believed that keeping residents involved was one of the greatest gifts I could offer.

He smiled kindly and said, "Jeremy, I hope you don't take this the wrong way."

Whenever a conversation begins like that, you naturally wonder what's coming next.

He explained that his mother sometimes seemed uncomfortable when I tried to engage her. He wanted me to understand that it wasn't because she didn't like me or appreciate what I was doing.

She had simply always been an introvert. Long before dementia entered her life, she had found peace in quiet places. Crowds drained her. Constant conversation exhausted her. She had always needed moments of silence to recharge.

I remember thinking how easy it would have been to mistake her quietness for loneliness.

Instead, her son helped me see something I had completely overlooked.

I wasn't learning about dementia that afternoon.

I was learning about his mother.

That conversation changed everything.

Instead of inviting her to every lively activity, I began looking for quieter ways to spend time together. Sometimes I would put on soft music and simply sit nearby. Other times we would walk slowly through the neighborhood without feeling the need to fill every moment with conversation. There were days when we sat together in comfortable silence, looking out the window or watching the world around us. Occasionally we exchanged a few words, but often we didn't say anything at all.

To my surprise, those became some of our most meaningful moments together.

I realized I had spent so much time thinking that engagement required talking that I had forgotten one simple truth.

Presence is engagement.

She didn't need me to entertain her.

She didn't need me to ask another question or introduce another activity.

She simply needed someone who respected the way she had always experienced the world.

Over time, we developed our own quiet friendship. Whenever her son came to visit, I would often sit with her until he arrived. We would share those peaceful moments together, and when I saw him walk through the door, I quietly excused myself so they could enjoy their time together. There was something beautiful about those visits because I knew I had honored not only the woman she was living with dementia but also the woman she had been throughout her entire life.

That experience taught our entire activity team an important lesson. Not every meaningful activity has to be energetic. Not every resident enjoys large groups, music, games, or constant conversation. Some people connect best through quiet companionship. Others find comfort in reading, listening to gentle music, holding someone's hand, or simply sharing the same space without expectations. Personality does not disappear because someone develops dementia. It continues to shape the way they experience the world.

Psalm 46:10 begins with the words, "Be still, and know that I am God." I have always loved that verse, but caring for this resident gave it new meaning. In a world that often believes we must constantly be doing something, God reminds us that there is value in simply being still. I discovered that caregiving works much the same way. Sometimes our greatest gift is not another activity or another conversation. Sometimes our greatest gift is our quiet presence.

Looking back, I smile when I think about that conversation with her son. He could have simply accepted that his mother didn't participate very much. Instead, he helped me understand her in a way I never could have on my own. He reminded me that every resident arrives with a lifetime of experiences, preferences, and personality traits that deserve to be honored.

That quiet woman taught me one of the loudest lessons of my career.

Silence is not the absence of engagement.

Sometimes silence is engagement itself.

Sometimes the greatest act of love is simply sitting beside another person, expecting nothing, saying very little, and allowing them to know they are not alone. Those quiet moments rarely made headlines, and they never appeared on an activity calendar, but they became some of the most meaningful moments of my career. They reminded me that caregiving is not measured by how much we say or how busy we keep people. It is measured by how well we know the person sitting beside us and how willing we are to meet them exactly where they are.

Affectionate Behavior

Some of the most difficult moments I witnessed in memory care had very little to do with memory.

They had everything to do with love.

Over the years, I watched husbands and wives walk through one of the most heartbreaking parts of dementia. They came to visit every day, held hands, brought favorite snacks, shared old photographs, and continued loving the person they had married. Yet there were times when the disease changed how that love was expressed. Sometimes a spouse was no longer recognized. Sometimes affectionate behavior was directed toward someone else. Sometimes lifelong boundaries seemed to disappear as dementia changed judgment and lowered inhibitions.

Those moments were painful to witness.

They were even more painful for the families living through them.

One of the lessons I learned was that dementia changes the brain, but it does not erase the basic human need for love, comfort, and connection. Many people living with dementia continue to

seek affection because they long to feel safe. Unfortunately, the disease can make it difficult for them to recognize who provides that safety or how to express those feelings appropriately.

I remember talking with spouses who wrestled with emotions they never imagined they would face. Some were deeply hurt when their husband or wife no longer recognized them. Others found themselves grieving while their loved one was still physically present. A few surprised me by saying something that has stayed with me over the years. They told me, "As long as they're comforted and feel loved, I can live with that." Their words reflected an incredible depth of grace, even though I knew the journey remained painfully difficult.

Not everyone felt that way.

Many spouses experienced anger, sadness, embarrassment, or confusion. Those feelings were just as real and just as understandable. There is no single right way to respond to the changes dementia brings into a marriage. Every relationship is different because every love story is different.

As caregivers, our role was never to judge those emotions. Our role was to support both people. We cared for the individual living with dementia while also caring for the husband, wife, son, daughter, or family member trying to navigate unimaginable changes. Sometimes that meant offering reassurance. Sometimes it meant helping redirect inappropriate behavior with kindness and dignity. At other times, it meant encouraging families to speak with physicians, counselors, or mental health professionals who could help them process what they were experiencing.

I also learned that affectionate behavior was not always directed toward a spouse. There were occasions when residents became physically affectionate with staff members or other residents. Those situations required our team to work closely together. We always wanted to respond respectfully while protecting everyone's dignity and safety. Redirection, calm reassurance, and teamwork often became the most helpful tools. Behind every behavior was a person who deserved compassion, even when boundaries needed to be maintained.

The more years I spent in memory care, the more I realized that love takes many different forms. Sometimes love means holding someone's hand. Sometimes it means sitting quietly beside them. Sometimes it means letting go of expectations you never imagined you would have to surrender. And sometimes love means continuing to show up every single day, even when the person you came to see no longer remembers your name.

First Corinthians 13 reminds us that "Love is patient, love is kind." I have heard those words at countless weddings, but I came to understand them in a completely different way while working in memory care. Patience is not only waiting. Kindness is not only being gentle. Sometimes patience is continuing to love someone through heartbreaking changes that neither of you chose. Sometimes kindness is responding with compassion when the disease causes behavior that the person would never have chosen for themselves.

If you find yourself walking this difficult road, I hope you remember one thing.

You are not alone.

Many families have stood where you are standing. Many caregivers have wrestled with the same questions and experienced the same heartbreak. Reach out for support. Talk with trusted friends, healthcare professionals, clergy, counselors, or caregiver support groups. You do not have to carry these emotions by yourself.

Looking back on the many couples I cared for, I don't remember them for the painful moments dementia created. I remember the countless acts of love that continued long after memories began to fade. I remember spouses who faithfully visited every day, adjusted to new realities they never expected, and chose compassion over resentment time and time again. Those moments reminded me that while dementia can change many things, it cannot diminish the extraordinary capacity of the human heart to love.

That may be one of the greatest lessons I learned. Dementia can alter memory, personality, and behavior, but it can never erase the sacred commitment to care for another person. Love often looks different than it once did, but when it is rooted in grace, compassion, and faith, it continues to shine even through the most difficult seasons of life.

Noisy Environments Causing Expressive Behaviors

One of the first things I learned while working in memory care was that not everyone experiences the world the same way. For some residents, our neighborhood was full of life. There were conversations in the hallways, music playing during activities, televisions in common areas, dishes clattering at mealtimes, and staff members moving from room to room. To many of us, it simply sounded like another busy day. For one resident, however, it sounded like complete chaos.

Perhaps I noticed her struggles more quickly because I understand what it feels like to live in a world that can become overwhelming with sound. I have a bilateral hearing loss, and while my hearing aids have made an incredible difference in my life, they do not eliminate one of my biggest challenges. When several people are talking at once or there is a great deal of background noise, my brain works overtime trying to sort through everything I am hearing. Instead of hearing one clear conversation, I often hear everything at once. It can become mentally exhausting, and if I stay in that environment too long, I sometimes find myself becoming frustrated or overwhelmed. Looking back, I realize I have experienced my own expressive behaviors in noisy environments. There are times when I become quieter, withdraw from conversations, or simply need to step away for a few minutes to let my brain rest. Because of my own hearing loss, I could relate, at least in a small way, to how overwhelming the world must have felt for some of the residents I cared for.

This particular resident became increasingly anxious whenever the neighborhood grew louder. Her body would tense, her facial expressions changed, and she often appeared overwhelmed. She wasn't trying to be difficult or avoid other people. She was simply trying to make sense of an environment that had become too noisy for her brain to process comfortably. Watching her

taught me something I had never fully appreciated before. Our brains work incredibly hard to organize the sounds around us. Most of us automatically sort conversations, background music, doors closing, televisions, and everyday noises without giving it much thought. Dementia changes that process. Sounds that most people easily ignore can suddenly become confusing, distracting, or even frightening. The louder and busier the environment became, the harder it was for her to find peace.

As I spent more time getting to know her, I stopped asking how I could help her tolerate the noise and began asking a different question: What helps her feel calm? The answer surprised me. She loved opera music. Not casually, but deeply. Opera had been part of her life long before dementia, and it spoke to something inside her that the disease had not taken away. The music was familiar, comforting, and deeply connected to who she had always been. Once again, I was reminded that dementia changes many things, but it does not erase a lifetime of passions, memories, and experiences.

From that day forward, whenever I noticed the neighborhood becoming overwhelming, I would gently invite her to a quieter room. We created a peaceful space away from the constant activity, and I would play her favorite opera recordings. The change was almost immediate. Her shoulders relaxed, her breathing slowed, and the tension on her face softened. It was as though the noise of the world quietly faded away and something familiar welcomed her home again. Watching those moments unfold reminded me that meaningful engagement is often much simpler than we imagine. I didn't need an elaborate activity or complicated intervention. I simply needed to understand what mattered to her and create an environment where she could feel safe.

That experience changed the way I thought about every resident I cared for. Instead of assuming everyone should enjoy the same environment, I began paying much closer attention to individual needs. Some people thrived in lively group activities filled with conversation and laughter. Others needed peaceful spaces with fewer distractions. Some found comfort in music. Others preferred complete silence. Caregiving became less about finding one perfect environment and more about creating the right environment for each unique person.

Our team eventually created quiet areas throughout the memory care neighborhood where residents could retreat whenever the activity around them became overwhelming. Families can create those same kinds of spaces at home. A comfortable chair, soft lighting, familiar music, treasured photographs, or simply a quiet room away from televisions and household noise can become a place where someone feels secure and at peace. Sometimes the greatest gift we can offer another person is not more stimulation but less.

Isaiah 30:15 says, "In quietness and trust shall be your strength." I have often thought about that verse when I remember this resident. Her strength wasn't found in louder activities or constant conversation. It was found in quiet moments surrounded by something familiar and comforting. Those peaceful moments reminded me that God often meets us in stillness, and sometimes our role as caregivers is simply to create enough quiet for peace to be found.

To this day, whenever I hear opera music, I think of her. I also think about how she helped me better understand myself. We were living with very different challenges, yet we shared

something in common. We both knew what it felt like when the world became too loud. Caring for her reminded me that empathy often grows from our own experiences. The more we understand our own struggles, the better we can recognize them in someone else. She taught me that sometimes the greatest act of engagement is not adding more to a person's world. Sometimes it is gently taking the noise away so they can hear something that brings them peace.

Validation Skills

One of the greatest lessons I learned in memory care came from a resident who asked the same question over and over again. She had experienced a traumatic brain injury before coming to live in our memory care neighborhood, and every morning she seemed to wake up with a single question on her mind. Once that question settled there, it stayed with her for the rest of the day. She would ask it repeatedly, sometimes every few minutes, from the time she woke up until she went to bed. The specific question might change from one day to the next, but the pattern never did.

At first, I responded the way most people naturally would. I answered her question. Then I answered it again. And again. Before long, I found myself repeating the same response dozens of times throughout the day. No matter how clearly I explained the answer, it never seemed to satisfy her. Within minutes, she would ask it again as though we had never spoken. It wasn't long before the entire staff felt exhausted. Her constant questions wore on everyone. Because she was able to move around independently, she would follow staff members through the hallways, continuing to ask the same question over and over. Eventually, people would smile politely and say, "Why don't you go talk to Jeremy?" As the activity director, I somehow became the person everyone sent her to when they needed a break.

I'll admit there were days when I felt overwhelmed. I cared deeply about her, but I also had an entire neighborhood full of residents who deserved my attention. I wanted to help everyone, yet I often found myself feeling trapped in the same conversation for what seemed like hours. There were moments when I questioned whether anything I was doing was actually helping. Then one day, something changed. I stopped focusing on the question and began paying attention to the feeling behind it.

Rather than trying to convince her with another explanation, I started acknowledging her emotions. If she sounded worried, I talked about her worry. If she sounded frustrated, I recognized her frustration. If she seemed uncertain, I reassured her that she was safe. Almost immediately, I noticed a difference. The conversations became calmer, and her anxiety often eased. I realized she wasn't searching for information nearly as much as she was searching for reassurance. She wanted someone to understand how she was feeling, not simply answer the words she was saying.

That was my introduction to the power of validation. Validation doesn't mean agreeing with something that isn't true. It means recognizing that another person's emotions are real, even when the facts they describe are not. People living with dementia or brain injuries often lose the ability to clearly explain what they are experiencing, but they never lose the need to feel understood.

Once I embraced that idea, our conversations no longer felt like endless repetition. They became opportunities to help someone feel heard.

As I became more comfortable using validation, I started inviting her into our group activities. Before the activity began, I would spend a few moments acknowledging her concerns and reassuring her. Then I would gently weave the activity into the conversation we were already having. Instead of fighting against her reality, I entered it with compassion and gradually invited her into the moment we were sharing together. It wasn't perfect, and some days were much better than others, but over time I saw meaningful progress.

What surprised me most was that the other staff members began noticing the difference. They watched the conversations become less stressful and more compassionate. Before long, they started using validation themselves. Slowly, our entire community changed. We became more patient with one another because we had learned that understanding another person's feelings often accomplishes much more than trying to correct their words. She didn't just teach me how to become a better caregiver. She taught our entire team how to become more compassionate.

James 1:19 reminds us, "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry." Those words have guided me through countless conversations over the years. Listening is often the greatest gift we can offer another person. When we slow down enough to understand what someone is feeling instead of rushing to provide an answer, we create space for trust, comfort, and genuine connection.

Looking back, I smile when I think about that remarkable woman. She challenged my patience more than almost anyone I have ever cared for, but she also made me a much better caregiver. She taught me that validation is not simply another caregiving technique. It is an expression of respect. It tells another person, "I may not completely understand your experience, but I want to understand how you are feeling." That lesson has stayed with me far beyond memory care. Whether I am working with someone living with dementia, talking with a family caregiver, or simply having a conversation with a friend, I try to remember what she taught me. People don't always need another answer. More often than not, they simply need someone willing to listen, acknowledge their feelings, and remind them that they are not alone.

The Heart of Engagement

As I reflect on the many people who have shaped my journey as a caregiver, I realize that expressive behaviors are not interruptions to caregiving. They are caregiving. Every tear, every repeated question, every restless evening, every moment of silence, every affectionate gesture, and every anxious outburst was someone's way of communicating something they could no longer put into words. When I stopped seeing behaviors as problems to solve and started seeing them as stories waiting to be understood, everything changed. My relationships with residents grew deeper, my patience became stronger, and I found greater joy in the privilege of caring for others.

The stories in this chapter are not meant to provide every answer. In fact, there is always more to learn about expressive behaviors, and every person living with dementia has a unique story to tell. Researchers continue to discover new approaches, caregivers continue to share their experiences, and each day brings opportunities to grow in understanding. What I have shared with you are the lessons that have had the greatest impact on my own journey. These are the experiences that shaped me, challenged me, and helped me become a better caregiver. They are the truths I felt were most important to share with you.

My hope is not that you finish this chapter believing you have mastered expressive behaviors. My hope is that you feel more confident, more compassionate, and more willing to pause before reacting. Ask yourself, "What is this person trying to communicate?" Sometimes you will discover the answer immediately. Other times, you may never fully know. Even then, your patience, your presence, and your willingness to love someone through their confusion will matter more than you realize.

You will not always get it right. I certainly did not. There were times when I misunderstood someone, responded too quickly, or wished I had handled a situation differently. Those moments did not make me a failure. They became opportunities to learn, to grow, and to become more compassionate. Caregiving is not about perfection. It is about showing up each day with a heart that is willing to keep learning and loving.

If there is one lesson I hope stays with you long after you close this chapter, it is this: every behavior has meaning because every person has value. When we choose curiosity instead of frustration, compassion instead of correction, and presence instead of perfection, we create moments of genuine connection. Those moments may not always be easy, but they are often the moments that matter the most.

When the days become difficult, remember that you are not walking this journey alone. God sees every act of kindness, every gentle response, every comforting hand held, and every quiet moment you spend caring for another person. Even when your loved one cannot thank you or remember your name, your compassion reflects the love of Christ in a powerful way.

I often return to the words of Galatians 6:9 whenever I need encouragement: **"Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up."**

There will be days when you are tired, discouraged, or wondering if you are making a difference. Keep going. Continue listening. Continue learning. Continue showing compassion. Continue loving. Every moment you spend caring for another person matters. Your presence brings comfort. Your kindness brings hope. Your faithfulness makes a difference, even when you cannot see it. That is the true heart of engagement.

As I reflect on my own journey, I realize God had been preparing me for this calling long before I recognized it. Looking back, I can see how every experience built upon the one before it. My years in senior living taught me that every person has a story worth hearing. The residents I cared for became some of my greatest teachers. Their families trusted me during some of the most difficult seasons of their lives, and my coworkers walked beside me through days filled with laughter, tears, challenges, and celebrations. Every conversation, every success, every mistake, and every relationship helped shape not only the caregiver I was becoming but also the person God was calling me to be.

One moment stands out above all the others. In 2016, my parents called to tell me that my grandmother Flo had been diagnosed with dementia. Like so many families, we suddenly found ourselves searching for answers. I wanted to help, but I quickly realized how many people were walking this same road feeling overwhelmed and alone. That phone call inspired me to begin writing about dementia and engagement, hoping that something I had learned over the years might encourage another caregiver. At the time, I had no idea that one simple decision would begin a journey that would eventually lead to this book and to a ministry that continues to grow today.

Years later, God led me to Edge United Methodist Church in Groveland, Florida. It was there that everything began to come together. As I learned more about John Wesley and the Methodist understanding of faith, I found words for what I had been experiencing throughout my entire career. Wesley believed that faith is not something we keep to ourselves. He taught that there is no holiness apart from social holiness, reminding us that our relationship with God is lived out in the way we love, serve, and care for one another. I realized that caregiving had been teaching me that lesson all along. Every encouraging conversation, every comforting hand, every act of kindness, and every moment of simply being present became an opportunity to share the love of Christ.

Out of that realization, Mighty Caregivers was born. It was never meant to be another program or organization. It became a reminder that caregiving belongs to all of us. Whether we are caring for a spouse, a parent, a child, a friend, a neighbor, a coworker, or even a stranger, every act of compassion reflects God's love. Caregivers often underestimate the difference they make because they focus on everything they still need to do instead of recognizing the countless ways they are already changing lives. I wanted caregivers to see themselves through God's eyes. I wanted them to know that even on the days they feel tired, discouraged, or unnoticed, their love is making a difference.

That is why I chose the name Mighty Caregivers. We are not mighty because we are perfect. We are mighty because we continue to show up. We choose patience when frustration would be easier. We choose compassion when we are exhausted. We choose hope when the road ahead seems uncertain. We continue to love because Christ first loved us. That kind of strength is not measured by titles or accomplishments. It is measured by a willing heart that continues to care, one person and one moment at a time.

My Engaging Ideas

As you reach the end of this journal, I want to leave you with a few engaging ideas that come straight from my heart. They were not developed in a classroom or pulled from a textbook. They were shaped over more than twenty five years of serving as an activity director in senior living, walking alongside countless residents, listening to their stories, celebrating their victories, sitting with them through seasons of loss, and discovering, one relationship at a time, what meaningful engagement truly looks like. Every idea I share in these pages has been influenced by the incredible people I have had the privilege to know and care for. They have been my greatest teachers, and I will always be grateful for the trust they placed in me.

I owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to the seniors who welcomed me into their lives. They were far more than residents. They became my teachers, my friends, and some of the greatest examples of courage, humor, resilience, faith, and grace that I have ever known. Every conversation, every smile, every challenge, and every quiet moment taught me something new about caring for others. If this journal has encouraged you, much of the credit belongs to them. They helped shape my heart as a caregiver, and I hope their influence can now encourage you as well.

I do not share these ideas as someone who has all the answers. I am still learning every day. Every person is different, every caregiving situation is unique, and there is no single approach that works for everyone. My hope is that these ideas will spark your own creativity and give you the confidence to try something new. Take what is helpful, adapt it to your own situation, and trust that God will guide you as you care for the people He has placed in your life.

Above all, remember that engagement is not about creating the perfect activity. It is about creating meaningful moments. Sometimes that looks like a game, a favorite song, a walk outside, or looking through old photographs. Other times, it simply means sitting quietly, listening without rushing, holding a hand, or sharing a smile. Never underestimate the power of your presence. Long after an activity is forgotten, people will remember how you made them feel.

I also hope this journal is not the end of our conversation. One of the greatest lessons I have learned is that caregiving was never meant to be a journey we take alone. We become stronger when we encourage one another, share ideas, celebrate successes, and honestly talk about the challenges we face. That is why I created Mighty Caregivers. It is a community built on the belief that we care for ourselves so we can better care for others and that no caregiver should ever have to walk this journey alone.

I invite you to continue walking with me through Mighty Caregivers. Together we can share stories, exchange ideas, encourage one another, and continue discovering meaningful ways to engage the people we love and serve. My prayer is that these pages are not the end of your journey but the beginning of many moments filled with connection, compassion, hope, and joy. Thank you for allowing me to be part of your caregiving journey. It has truly been an honor to walk beside you.

The Value of Faith and Church Engagement and How Caregivers Can Help

Throughout my years of serving as an activity director, I have witnessed the incredible impact that faith and church engagement can have on people's lives. Time and again, I have watched someone who struggled to hold a conversation suddenly begin singing every word to a favorite hymn. I have seen faces brighten during the Lord's Prayer, hands fold naturally in prayer, and hearts find peace through familiar scriptures. Those moments reminded me that faith often reaches places where words alone cannot.

While these experiences were especially meaningful for people living with dementia, I have learned that the value of spiritual engagement extends far beyond memory loss. Faith can bring comfort to someone living with a chronic illness, hope to a person facing mental health challenges, encouragement during seasons of grief, strength through physical limitations, and a sense of belonging for those who feel isolated or lonely. No matter what journey a person is walking, faith has a unique way of reminding them that they are loved, valued, and never alone.

One of the greatest gifts caregivers can offer is helping people stay connected to their faith community. That connection may look different for every person. For some, it means attending worship services. For others, it may be watching a church service online, reading a favorite Bible passage together, listening to familiar hymns, praying before a meal, or simply talking about God's faithfulness through the years. The goal is not to do church perfectly. The goal is to help people remain connected to the faith that has sustained them throughout their lives.

Churches also have an important role to play in caregiving. They are more than buildings where people gather on Sundays. They are communities where people are known, supported, and loved. A simple visit, a phone call, a card in the mail, or a familiar face showing up at the door can remind someone that they are still an important part of the Body of Christ. Caregivers do not have to carry every burden alone, and churches have the opportunity to walk alongside them with practical help, encouragement, and prayer.

As caregivers, we have the privilege of nurturing not only a person's physical and emotional well being but also their spiritual well being. Sometimes the most meaningful moments happen when we simply sit quietly together, hold a hand during a prayer, sing a familiar hymn, or read a few verses of scripture. Those simple acts often bring peace that cannot be explained and hope that reaches beyond the circumstances of the day.

Jesus reminds us in Matthew 11:28, **"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."** Those words are an invitation for the people we care for and for us as caregivers. As we encourage others to remain connected to their faith, may we also remember to care for our own spiritual lives, trusting that God walks beside us and gives us the strength we need for each new day.

Engaging in Church Settings

One of the greatest gifts a caregiver can offer is helping someone remain connected to their church family. For many people, church is much more than a place they attend on Sunday mornings. It is where they have worshiped, prayed, celebrated milestones, grieved losses, and built lifelong friendships. Even when memory changes or physical limitations make participation more difficult, that connection to their faith community often remains an important part of who they are.

Helping someone engage in church may require a little planning, but it is almost always worth the effort. Choosing a familiar worship service or a smaller gathering can help create a more comfortable experience. Arriving a few minutes early allows time to get settled, and sitting near an exit provides the flexibility to step outside for a quiet break if needed. Remember that participation does not have to look the way it once did. A person may quietly hum along with a favorite hymn instead of singing every word, listen attentively without responding aloud, or simply enjoy being surrounded by the sounds and presence of worship. Those moments are just as meaningful.

I have also learned that simple sensory experiences can make worship feel familiar and comforting. Holding a bulletin, touching a cross, receiving communion, lighting a candle, listening to a beloved hymn, or hearing a familiar scripture can awaken memories that have remained in a person's heart for many years. Sometimes those moments create a sense of peace that words alone cannot provide.

Caregivers also have an opportunity to gently educate church leaders and members about what engagement may look like for someone living with dementia or other challenges. A person may wander during the service, repeat a phrase, ask questions, or need to leave the sanctuary for a few moments before returning. These behaviors should never be viewed as disruptions. They are simply another way people participate. A welcoming church recognizes that every person experiences worship differently and that every expression of faith has value.

Church engagement extends beyond Sunday morning worship. Small groups, Bible studies, prayer gatherings, pastoral visits, communion, fellowship meals, service projects, and even sitting quietly in a sanctuary can provide meaningful opportunities for connection. Every person will engage differently, and every moment spent together in faith can strengthen both the individual and the caregiver.

Engaging Faith at Home

There are seasons when attending church simply is not possible. Illness, caregiving responsibilities, transportation challenges, or physical limitations may make leaving home difficult. During those times, faith does not stop. Some of the most meaningful moments of spiritual connection can happen around a kitchen table, in a living room, or beside a favorite chair.

Faith at home does not have to be complicated. Playing familiar hymns or worship music can bring comfort and awaken treasured memories. Reading a favorite Bible passage, sharing a brief devotional, or praying together can remind someone that God is present in every season of life. Watching a worship service online allows many people to remain connected to their church family even when they cannot attend in person. Sometimes the most meaningful act of all is simply sitting quietly together, acknowledging God's presence, and allowing His peace to fill the room.

Throughout my years as an activity director, I learned that spiritual engagement is not measured by how much someone remembers or how actively they participate. It is measured by the connection they experience with God and with the people who love them. Whether that connection happens in a crowded sanctuary or in the quiet of a living room, those moments have the power to bring comfort, hope, and peace that reach far beyond words.

Website and YouTube Channel: Spiritual Eldercare

Over the years, I have discovered many resources that have helped me engage people in meaningful ways, but one that I return to again and again is **Spiritual Eldercare**. It has become one of my favorite resources because it is simple, gentle, and created with older adults and caregivers in mind. The videos include familiar hymns, scripture readings, prayers, and peaceful reflections that are easy to follow and bring comfort to people at many different stages of life.

Although Spiritual Eldercare is often associated with dementia care, I have found it to be valuable for so much more. I have used similar faith based engagement with people living with chronic illness, anxiety, depression, mobility challenges, grief, and loneliness. I have also found it helpful for individuals who simply can no longer attend church because of health concerns or physical limitations. The familiar songs, comforting scriptures, and peaceful pace create opportunities for people to reconnect with their faith in ways that feel natural and reassuring.

One of the things I appreciate most is that there is no pressure to participate in a certain way. Sometimes I have watched the videos alongside someone and simply enjoyed the experience together. Other times they have led to wonderful conversations about favorite hymns, meaningful Bible verses, or memories of a church that was important to them. There have also been moments when a person quietly listened without saying a word, and that was enough. Faith has a way of reaching the heart even when words are few.

I encourage caregivers to make spiritual engagement a natural part of everyday life. A favorite hymn during breakfast, a short devotional before bedtime, a worship service on Sunday morning, or a quiet moment listening to scripture can all become meaningful opportunities to nurture a person's faith. These simple moments often provide comfort, reduce anxiety, and remind people that they remain deeply connected to God and to the faith that has carried them throughout their lives.

As I close this section, I want to leave you with one final encouragement. Spiritual engagement is not about having all the answers or leading the perfect devotion. It is about companionship. It is

about sitting beside someone, sharing a moment of peace, and creating space for God to meet both of you exactly where you are. Whether you are sitting together in a church pew, watching a worship service at home, listening to a favorite hymn, or simply holding someone's hand during a quiet prayer, your presence is a gift.

Never underestimate the difference you make. Long after words have faded, people often remember how they felt. By making room for faith, hope, and love in the everyday moments of caregiving, you are nurturing not only the person in your care but also your own spirit. Those sacred moments may seem small, but they often become the memories that stay with us the longest.

Balloon Volleyball

If I had to choose one activity that has brought the most laughter, connection, and joy throughout my years as an activity director, balloon volleyball would be near the top of the list. It is simple, inexpensive, and adaptable for almost everyone, yet I have watched it transform an ordinary afternoon into one filled with smiles, cheering, and genuine engagement. I have used balloon volleyball with people living with dementia, individuals recovering from illness, adults with developmental disabilities, and residents who simply needed a reason to move and laugh together. Time after time, I have seen the same result. People become engaged.

What makes balloon volleyball so effective is that success comes naturally. A balloon floats slowly through the air, giving people time to react without feeling rushed or intimidated. Someone who may not feel confident throwing or catching a ball can often reach up and gently tap a balloon. That simple success builds confidence and encourages people to keep participating. While they are enjoying themselves, they are also improving range of motion, hand eye coordination, balance, and gentle strength without thinking of it as exercise.

I have also learned that balloon volleyball is about much more than physical movement. As participants watch the balloon drift across the circle, they stay focused, anticipate where it will go next, and decide how they want to respond. Just as important, they begin responding to one another. They laugh when someone makes an unexpected save, clap when the balloon stays in the air, encourage friends by name, and celebrate even the smallest success. Even those who never touch the balloon often become part of the experience by smiling, cheering, or simply enjoying the energy of the group. Everyone belongs.

When introducing balloon volleyball, I try to create an atmosphere where there is no pressure to perform. I remind everyone that there are no winners or losers and no right or wrong way to participate. Some people will hit the balloon with enthusiasm. Others may gently tap it once or twice. Some may choose to watch the entire activity. Every level of participation has value because engagement is not measured by how many times someone touches the balloon. It is measured by whether they feel included.

One lesson I have learned over the years is to watch the people, not just the activity. Balloon volleyball can become surprisingly energetic, and some participants may become tired without

realizing it. Slowing the pace, offering breaks, or simply passing the balloon gently around the circle keeps the activity enjoyable and safe. The goal has never been endurance. The goal has always been connection.

Perhaps that is why I continue returning to balloon volleyball after all these years. It reminds me that meaningful engagement does not require expensive equipment or elaborate planning. Sometimes all it takes is a simple balloon, a circle of people, and a caregiver who is willing to laugh alongside them. Those shared moments often become the memories that last the longest.

Traveling

Travel has always been one of my favorite hobbies, and over the years I have discovered that it can also be a meaningful way to engage someone you care about. Whether it is a day trip across town or a vacation across the country, traveling creates opportunities to share experiences, make memories, and enjoy time together. Like any activity, however, it works best when it is planned with the person's abilities, interests, and comfort in mind.

Before planning a trip, think about how the environment may affect the person you are supporting. Crowds, unfamiliar places, loud noises, and changes in routine can be exciting for some people but overwhelming for others. Consider shorter outings, familiar destinations, or places that allow for flexibility if someone needs a break. Sometimes talking with a physician before traveling can also help you prepare for any medical or emotional needs that may arise during the trip.

If traveling long distances is no longer realistic, remember that the joy of travel does not have to disappear. Some of my favorite moments have come through what I call armchair travel. Today we have access to incredible videos that allow us to visit almost any place in the world without leaving home. Watching a train ride through the mountains, a walk through a favorite city, a beach sunset, or a national park can spark wonderful conversations and treasured memories. Ask questions, share stories, and allow the person to guide the conversation toward places that have been meaningful in their life.

Sometimes the destination matters less than the experience of exploring together. Whether you are driving to a favorite restaurant, visiting a nearby park, or watching a travel video from the comfort of home, the real gift is the time you spend together. Those moments of discovery often become opportunities for connection, conversation, and joy.

Bubble Wrap

One of the simplest engagement tools I have ever used is something most people throw away without a second thought. Bubble wrap may seem ordinary, but over the years I have discovered that it can become a wonderful source of relaxation, sensory engagement, and laughter.

When I introduce bubble wrap, I simply invite people to explore it at their own pace. Some enjoy carefully popping each bubble one at a time. Others cannot resist using both hands to pop as

many as possible. As simple as the activity appears, many meaningful things are happening at once. Fingers are moving, fine motor skills are being exercised, the familiar popping sound provides satisfying sensory feedback, and each bubble offers a small sense of accomplishment. For many people, the activity is calming and helps reduce stress.

For those who enjoy a little more movement, bubble wrap can also be placed on the floor for a supervised walking activity. Feeling and hearing the bubbles pop beneath their feet adds another layer of sensory stimulation. Safety should always come first, so I remain close by, encourage people to go slowly, and adapt the activity to each person's comfort and abilities.

As with every activity in this journal, the bubble wrap is not the most important part. The real value comes from the relationship that develops while sharing the experience. Laugh together. Celebrate every pop. Talk about favorite memories or simply enjoy the quiet. Those moments remind us that meaningful engagement does not have to be complicated. Sometimes the simplest activities create the deepest connections, and those connections are what caregiving is truly all about.

Hand Care

One of the simplest and most meaningful ways I have found to engage someone is through hand care. Over the years, I have discovered that caring for a person's hands is about much more than grooming. It is an opportunity to slow down, build trust, and spend uninterrupted time together. Some of my best conversations with residents began while gently washing their hands, applying lotion, or offering a simple manicure. There is something calming about sitting together without feeling rushed. The focus shifts away from completing a task and toward simply being present with one another.

Before beginning, I always make sure the person is comfortable with both the activity and with me. I explain what I am going to do using simple, reassuring language and invite them to participate at whatever level feels comfortable. Moving slowly and talking through each step helps build trust and reduces anxiety. I also pay close attention to skin integrity by carefully removing rings, watches, or other jewelry before beginning. Warm water, gentle soap, soft towels, and lotion are usually all that is needed to create a relaxing experience.

As we spend time together, I have learned to let the conversation unfold naturally. Some people begin sharing stories about their families, their careers, or favorite memories. Others simply enjoy the quiet. Both are equally meaningful. I never feel the need to fill every moment with conversation because sometimes the greatest gift we can offer is peaceful companionship.

If someone would like their nails polished, I am always careful to explain that the polish needs time to dry. Even with reminders, it is common for someone to forget and accidentally touch clothing, furniture, or another object before the polish has dried. When that happens, I remind myself that the polish can always be cleaned up. Protecting a person's dignity is far more important than protecting a freshly painted nail. Responding with patience instead of frustration helps preserve the joy of the moment.

Safety should always remain a priority. Nail polish remover and other supplies should be kept out of reach when they are not being used, especially for individuals living with memory loss or cognitive changes. I have learned that creating a safe environment allows everyone to relax and enjoy the experience without unnecessary worry.

When the hand care is finished, I always take a moment to thank the person for spending time with me. It may seem like a small gesture, but I believe it reminds both of us that we have shared something meaningful together. Hand care is not really about beautiful nails or soft hands. It is about slowing down long enough to help another person feel valued, respected, and cared for.

Rummaging

One behavior I have seen countless times throughout my years in memory care is rummaging. At first, it can be confusing for caregivers to watch someone repeatedly open drawers, sort through boxes, search closets, or handle the same objects over and over again. It is easy to assume the person is simply making a mess or looking for trouble, but over the years I have learned that rummaging usually has a purpose, even if the person cannot explain what they are searching for.

For many people living with dementia, rummaging provides comfort. It gives their hands something meaningful to do and often helps reduce boredom, anxiety, or restlessness. Rather than trying to stop the behavior, I have found it much more helpful to work with it. Once I stopped viewing rummaging as a problem to fix, it became another opportunity for engagement.

One of my favorite approaches is creating themed rummaging boxes. These simple boxes give people a safe place to explore while honoring their interests, occupations, hobbies, and life experiences. Over the years I have filled boxes with folded dish towels, fabric pieces, old wallets, eyeglass cases, keys, purses, notebooks, calendars, greeting cards, family photographs, buttons, measuring tapes, ribbons, scarves, costume jewelry, ties, gloves, and many other everyday items. There is no perfect formula. The best rummaging boxes reflect the person's life story and invite curiosity.

For individuals whose faith has always been an important part of their lives, I have also created faith centered rummaging boxes. A small Bible, prayer cards, hymn lyrics, church bulletins, favorite scripture passages, photographs of their church, a cross, or other meaningful religious items often become wonderful conversation starters. I have watched people who struggled to remember recent events immediately recognize a favorite hymn or begin talking about the church they attended for decades. Those moments remind me how deeply faith can remain rooted in a person's heart.

If rummaging begins happening throughout the home, I encourage caregivers to focus on creating a safe environment instead of constantly redirecting the behavior. Valuables, medications, sharp objects, and anything unsafe should be stored securely, while meaningful items can remain available for exploration. Sitting beside someone as they rummage, asking gentle questions, or simply sharing the experience often creates connection instead of conflict.

Perhaps the greatest lesson rummaging has taught me is that not every behavior needs to be stopped. Sometimes behaviors simply need to be understood. When we respond with patience instead of frustration and curiosity instead of correction, we discover new opportunities to connect with the people we care for. What first appears to be a challenge often becomes another meaningful moment of engagement.

Cutting Scrap Paper

Over the years, I have learned that some of the most meaningful activities are also the simplest. One activity I have used many times is cutting scrap paper into smaller pieces for community organizations. At first, it may not seem very exciting, but I have watched it give people something we all long for: a sense of purpose.

Before beginning, I explain what we are doing and, more importantly, why we are doing it. I tell them that the paper will be used by schools, libraries, health centers, or other organizations for notes, reminders, and everyday tasks. As soon as people realize their work will help someone else, the activity becomes much more than cutting paper. It becomes an opportunity to contribute.

I always adapt the activity to the person's abilities. Some people enjoy carefully measuring and organizing the paper into neat stacks. Others simply enjoy cutting a few sheets at a time. For someone living with more advanced cognitive changes, tearing the paper into smaller pieces may be easier and just as meaningful. The goal has never been perfectly cut paper. The goal is helping someone experience success and feel that they are still making a difference.

While we work, I encourage conversation. We often talk about volunteer work, favorite jobs, or memories of helping others throughout life. Sometimes we simply enjoy the quiet rhythm of cutting paper together. The repetitive motion can be calming, and seeing the growing stack of completed paper gives people a visible reminder that they have accomplished something worthwhile.

Whenever possible, I like to complete the experience by delivering the paper together. A short drive to a school, library, or community organization creates another opportunity for engagement and reinforces that their efforts truly mattered. Even if the delivery happens another day, talking about where the paper is going helps connect today's activity with tomorrow's purpose.

This activity has reminded me that meaningful engagement is not always about entertainment. Sometimes it is about giving people the opportunity to help someone else. Purpose has a remarkable way of bringing joy, confidence, and connection into everyday life.

Coloring Pages

Coloring has been one of my favorite quiet activities because it creates a peaceful space where people can simply relax and enjoy the moment. There is no pressure to finish quickly or create a perfect picture. Instead, the focus becomes spending time together while encouraging creativity, conversation, and calm.

Over the years, I have learned that choosing the right coloring page makes all the difference. While many adult coloring books are filled with intricate patterns and tiny spaces, I have found that simpler designs are often much more successful, especially for individuals living with dementia or vision changes. Large, open spaces allow people to experience success without becoming frustrated or overwhelmed.

I usually begin by inviting the person to choose a picture and select the colors they would like to use. Markers and crayons often work better than colored pencils because they require less pressure and produce bright, satisfying results. If someone has difficulty seeing the lines or deciding which color to use, I simply color alongside them, offering gentle encouragement without taking over. The experience should feel shared rather than directed.

One lesson I have learned is that praise matters far more than perfection. I celebrate every effort, every color chosen, and every moment of participation. There is no need to stay inside the lines or create a masterpiece. The value of coloring has never been the finished page. It is found in relaxation, conversation, and the quiet confidence that grows when someone feels successful.

Coloring can also become tiring. Hands become fatigued, eyes need a break, and attention naturally fades. When that happens, I simply pause. We might admire the picture together, talk about the colors we chose, or sit quietly for a few moments before deciding whether to continue. Even a short period of coloring can become a meaningful opportunity to slow down and connect.

Like so many activities in this journal, coloring reminds me that engagement is not about creating something perfect. It is about creating moments where people feel peaceful, valued, and connected. Sometimes a box of crayons, a simple picture, and an unhurried conversation are all it takes to brighten someone's day.

Exercise

Throughout my years as an activity director, I have learned that movement is one of the greatest gifts we can offer ourselves and the people we care for. Exercise does not have to involve a gym, heavy weights, or long workouts to make a difference. Sometimes the smallest movements have the biggest impact. A gentle stretch, a few arm raises, or simply standing up and sitting down a few times can help someone feel stronger, more confident, and more engaged with the day ahead.

One of my favorite ways to encourage movement is through chair exercises. They provide a safe and comfortable way for people of many different abilities to stay active. Whether someone is recovering from an illness, managing a chronic condition, feeling unsteady on their feet, or simply becoming older, a sturdy chair offers stability while allowing the focus to remain on movement instead of the fear of falling. I always encourage good posture, steady breathing, and slow, comfortable movements. There is never a need to rush.

As caregivers, one of the most important things we can do is watch the person instead of the exercise. If someone becomes tired, short of breath, or uncomfortable, it is perfectly okay to pause, rest, or try something different. Every movement should be adapted to the person's

abilities, not the other way around. When questions arise about what exercises are appropriate, a physician or physical therapist can provide valuable guidance.

Today there are countless chair exercise videos available online, making it easy to find routines that match a person's interests and abilities. Some include music, others focus on stretching, balance, or gentle strength building. I encourage caregivers to explore different options until they find something that feels enjoyable. Exercise should never feel like a punishment. It should be an opportunity to celebrate what the body can still do.

Perhaps the greatest lesson exercise has taught me is that consistency matters more than intensity. A few minutes of movement every day often provides greater benefits than an occasional strenuous workout. When caregivers participate alongside the people they support, exercise becomes something much more meaningful than physical activity. It becomes another opportunity to laugh, encourage one another, and spend quality time together.

Seasonal Reminders

One activity I have always enjoyed is creating seasonal wreaths together. It is a simple project, but it does so much more than decorate a door. It helps people stay connected to the changing seasons while encouraging conversation, creativity, and shared memories. As we choose flowers, ribbons, leaves, or holiday decorations, we naturally begin talking about favorite family traditions, celebrations, vacations, and special moments from years gone by.

When making a wreath, I try to keep everything simple. I lay out only a few decorations at a time so the project never feels overwhelming. The person may choose colors, decide where decorations should be placed, or simply offer opinions while I do the hands on work. Every level of participation has value because the goal is not creating a perfect wreath. The goal is creating a meaningful experience together.

Safety is always important. If hot glue is needed, I handle it myself or use safer alternatives whenever possible. There is no reason to rush through the project. In fact, I have found that completing a wreath over several short sessions often creates even more opportunities for conversation and engagement than trying to finish it all at once.

When the wreath is complete, I love hanging it where everyone can enjoy it. Each time the person sees it, they are reminded not only of the season but also of the time spent creating something together. That reminder often becomes just as meaningful as the wreath itself.

Sorting a Deck of Cards

One of the easiest activities to set up is sorting a deck of playing cards. It requires very little preparation, yet it encourages concentration, visual scanning, decision making, and gentle problem solving in a relaxed and enjoyable way.

I usually begin by spreading the cards across a table and inviting the person to help organize them. Some people enjoy separating the red cards from the black cards. Others prefer matching numbers, putting the suits together, or arranging the cards in order. There is no single right way to do the activity because it can easily be adapted to each person's abilities and interests.

Over the years, I have learned that mistakes are not something to correct. If a card is placed in the wrong pile, I simply keep the conversation going and gently redirect if needed. The purpose is not to create perfectly sorted cards. The purpose is to keep the person engaged and feeling successful. A relaxed atmosphere allows confidence to grow while reducing frustration.

Once the cards are sorted, I often turn the activity into a simple game. If the person enjoys traditional card games, we might play one they have loved for years. If they prefer something easier, a game of high card works well. Each person turns over a card, and the highest card wins the round. The rules can be as simple or as creative as you would like because the real prize is not winning the game. It is spending time together.

Like so many activities in this journal, a deck of cards reminds me that meaningful engagement does not require expensive supplies or complicated planning. Sometimes the simplest activities become the ones that create the most laughter, conversation, and connection. Those shared moments are often what people remember long after the cards have been put away.

Spelling Word Games

One activity I have enjoyed using over the years is simple spelling games. At first glance, spelling may seem like something we leave behind after childhood, but I have learned that it can be a wonderful way to gently engage the brain while creating opportunities for conversation and success.

Most of us learned to spell at a young age, and those memories often become deeply rooted over a lifetime. Even when someone is living with dementia or another condition affecting memory, the knowledge of how to spell a familiar word may still be there. The challenge is often not that the information has disappeared, but that it has become more difficult to retrieve. That is why I never think of spelling as a test. Instead, I see it as an invitation to work together.

I like to begin with simple, familiar words that relate to the person's life or interests. If someone struggles, I might offer the first letter, slowly say the word together, or write part of it on paper. Sometimes we spell the word together out loud, while other times we laugh as we figure it out one letter at a time. Every attempt is worth celebrating because the goal is participation, not perfection.

Over the years, I have also learned that different health conditions affect the brain in different ways. Someone recovering from a stroke may gradually regain language skills through therapy and practice, while a person living with dementia may experience increasing difficulty retrieving words over time. Regardless of the diagnosis, spelling activities can still provide valuable mental

stimulation and meaningful opportunities for success when approached with patience and encouragement.

Perhaps the greatest lesson spelling games have taught me is that every word represents more than a collection of letters. Behind each word is a lifetime of experiences, memories, and relationships. When we slow down and engage together, we are not simply exercising the brain. We are honoring the person who still has so much to share.

Finishing Familiar Phrases

One of my favorite ways to spark conversation is by beginning a familiar phrase and inviting the other person to finish it. I have been amazed by how often a simple saying or nursery rhyme brings a smile, laughter, or a memory that seemed hidden just moments before.

I might begin with a phrase like, "There was an old woman who lived in a shoe. She had so many children she didn't know what to..." and then pause. Sometimes the person immediately finishes the sentence. Other times they smile, laugh, or quietly mouth the final words. Even when the phrase is not completed, something meaningful is happening. The brain is searching familiar pathways that have been strengthened over a lifetime.

When nursery rhymes are unfamiliar or no longer meaningful, I often switch to common sayings, favorite song lyrics, Bible verses, or expressions the person has used throughout their life. Every individual is different, and discovering what connects with them becomes part of the journey. The goal is never to see how much someone remembers. The goal is to create moments that feel familiar, comfortable, and enjoyable.

Over the years, I have learned to keep these activities lighthearted. If one phrase does not spark a response, I simply move on to another. There is no pressure and no expectation of getting the answer right. Sometimes the greatest success is simply sharing a smile or hearing someone laugh because a familiar phrase brought back a happy memory.

These little moments remind me that long after many recent memories have faded, familiar words often remain tucked safely away. We simply have the privilege of helping someone find them again.

Scrapbooking

One of the most meaningful projects I have shared with individuals and families over the years has been creating scrapbooks and memory books. More than any finished album, I treasure the conversations that happened while we built them together.

A scrapbook tells the story of a person's life. As we gather photographs, postcards, greeting cards, newspaper clippings, and other keepsakes, we begin remembering birthdays, vacations, weddings, careers, family traditions, churches, and friendships. Every page becomes another opportunity to celebrate a life that continues to matter.

Whenever possible, I encourage the person to participate in creating the book. They may choose photographs, arrange pages, hold keepsakes, or simply tell stories while I do the hands on work. There is no right or wrong way to build a memory book because every life has its own unique story.

As dementia progresses, I have learned that the role of the caregiver often changes. During the earlier stages, the person may tell many of the stories themselves. As memory changes, I may find myself sharing more of the memories, identifying people in photographs, or gently describing what was happening in a particular picture. Even then, I never think of the scrapbook as a way to test memory. Instead, it becomes a bridge for conversation, connection, and shared experiences.

One of my favorite parts of creating a scrapbook is watching unexpected memories appear. A single photograph, a familiar face, or a picture of an old home may suddenly unlock a story no one expected. Those moments cannot be forced or predicted. They simply arrive as gifts, and when they do, I slow down and enjoy them.

In the end, a scrapbook is about much more than preserving photographs. It is about honoring a person's journey, celebrating the life they have lived, and reminding them that their story continues to matter. Every page becomes another opportunity to connect, reflect, and spend meaningful time together, and those moments are often the greatest treasure of all.

Tactile Stimulation

One of the things I have learned over the years is that meaningful engagement does not always require conversation. Sometimes a person's hands tell the story before words ever can. Touch is one of our earliest senses to develop, and for many people it remains a source of comfort long after other abilities have changed. I have watched someone who struggled to communicate become completely focused while exploring a soft fabric, squeezing a sensory pad, or running their fingers across a familiar object. Those quiet moments remind me that engagement often happens beyond words.

I have found that tactile activities work especially well because there is no right or wrong way to participate. Some people enjoy slowly exploring different textures, while others like to keep their hands busy by opening zippers, fastening buttons, or sorting small objects. Activity aprons, sensory pads, textured balls, scarves, smooth stones, wooden objects, and other safe sensory items all invite curiosity while encouraging movement and exploration. For individuals living with more advanced dementia, these simple experiences often provide comfort without requiring complicated instructions.

Over the years, I have also enjoyed creating sensory baskets filled with familiar household items. Every basket becomes a new opportunity to discover what captures a person's interest. One individual may spend several minutes folding a soft scarf, while another becomes fascinated by the smooth surface of a stone or the texture of a sponge. I have learned not to direct these

moments too much. Instead, I sit nearby, observe, ask gentle questions when appropriate, and simply enjoy the experience alongside them.

Perhaps the greatest lesson tactile activities have taught me is that not every meaningful interaction requires words. Sometimes sitting quietly beside someone while they explore the world through touch is one of the most compassionate things we can do. Those peaceful moments often provide comfort, reduce anxiety, and remind us that our presence is every bit as important as the activity itself.

Baking and Cooking

Some of my favorite moments as an activity director have taken place in the kitchen. There is something special about the familiar sights, sounds, smells, and routines of cooking that seem to awaken memories almost effortlessly. Whether we are baking cookies, making pudding, peeling vegetables, or simply stirring ingredients together, the kitchen has a remarkable way of bringing people together.

I have learned that cooking can be meaningful at every stage of dementia. During the earlier stages, someone may enjoy measuring ingredients, following a recipe, or helping prepare a favorite family meal. As memory changes, their role may become smaller, but it is never less important. I remember watching someone in a fairly advanced stage of dementia pick up a potato and begin peeling it almost instinctively. The room immediately filled with smiles and celebration. It was not about peeling the potato perfectly. It was about seeing a familiar skill reappear and witnessing the confidence that came with it.

Safety always comes first in the kitchen. I carefully choose tasks that match each person's abilities and pay close attention when working around sharp utensils, hot surfaces, or heavy equipment. Some of my favorite activities require very little risk at all. Shucking corn, snapping green beans, stirring batter, mashing potatoes, mixing pudding, or decorating cookies all provide meaningful opportunities to participate while engaging the senses in wonderful ways.

As we cook together, I encourage conversation about favorite family recipes, holiday traditions, restaurants, gardens, and meals shared with loved ones. The smell of fresh bread or cookies baking often brings back memories long before anyone says a word. Sometimes a familiar recipe becomes the beginning of a story that has not been shared in years.

One thing I have learned is that the kitchen offers far more than cooking. Folding towels, wiping counters, organizing drawers, sorting utensils, sweeping the porch, dusting furniture, or vacuuming a room can all become meaningful forms of engagement. These familiar household routines provide purpose while reinforcing a sense of independence and accomplishment. Many people enjoy contributing in ways that feel natural because they have spent a lifetime caring for their homes and families.

Throughout these activities, I focus on participation rather than perfection. I celebrate every effort, every smile, and every willingness to help. Whether someone mixes the batter, folds a

towel, or simply sits nearby enjoying the aroma of a favorite recipe, they are still participating in something meaningful.

Over the years, I have come to believe that some of the best engagement happens during ordinary moments. A kitchen table, a favorite recipe, a basket of laundry, or a simple household chore can become an opportunity to laugh together, share stories, and strengthen relationships. Those everyday moments often become the ones we remember most because they remind us that caregiving is not about completing tasks. It is about sharing life together.

Public Shows

I believe everyone deserves the opportunity to enjoy a movie, concert, play, or other public event whenever possible. Throughout my years of working with older adults, I have seen how meaningful these outings can be. At the same time, I have learned that they require thoughtful planning because what feels exciting to one person may feel overwhelming to another.

Before attending a show, I think about the person's current abilities, comfort level, and how they typically respond to busy environments. Bright lights, loud sounds, large crowds, and unfamiliar surroundings can become overwhelming, especially for someone living with dementia. That does not mean these experiences should be avoided. It simply means we should prepare with flexibility and patience.

Whenever possible, I choose seats along the aisle. This makes it much easier if we need to step out for a break without climbing past other people. I also like to sit closest to the aisle while the person I am supporting sits beside me. This allows me to offer reassurance while helping everyone remain safe as people move through the theater. Carrying a small flashlight has also been helpful when leaving or returning during a dark performance.

One thing I have learned is that movie previews can sometimes be more overwhelming than the movie itself. The quick scene changes, loud sound effects, and fast pace may create confusion before the feature even begins. If I notice signs of restlessness or anxiety, I quietly begin a conversation, offer reassurance, or suggest taking a short walk until the movie starts.

Perhaps the most important lesson I have learned is to let go of expectations. Sometimes we enjoy the entire performance together. Other times we spend more time in the lobby than in the theater. Both experiences are perfectly okay. If leaving early is what the person needs, then leaving early is the right decision. The goal has never been finishing the show. The goal has always been creating a positive experience together.

Sorting Socks

Some of the most meaningful engagement happens during ordinary household routines. One activity I have used countless times is sorting socks and folding laundry. It may seem like a simple chore, but for many people it feels familiar, purposeful, and deeply satisfying.

Most of us have spent years folding clothes, matching socks, and putting laundry away. Those routines often remain familiar even when other memories begin to fade. Matching socks by color, size, or pattern encourages concentration, visual scanning, and gentle problem solving while allowing people to contribute in a meaningful way.

I usually begin with a small basket rather than a large pile of laundry. Keeping the task simple helps prevent frustration while allowing the person to experience success. If matching socks becomes difficult, sorting them by color or texture works just as well. The purpose is not perfectly folded laundry. The purpose is helping someone feel useful and involved.

One thing I appreciate about this activity is that it can encourage independence. Once someone feels comfortable with the task, I can often step away briefly while they continue sorting. When I return, I always thank them for their help because appreciation reinforces the value of their contribution.

Sorting laundry has reminded me that everyday routines often become some of the best opportunities for engagement. Simple household tasks allow people to continue doing something they have successfully done throughout their lives, and that familiar sense of purpose can be incredibly meaningful.

The Internet

The internet has become one of my favorite tools for creating meaningful engagement because it gives us access to almost anything we can imagine. With a computer, tablet, or television, we can visit places around the world, listen to favorite music, explore hobbies, attend worship services, or revisit cherished memories without ever leaving home.

When I use online resources, I always begin by thinking about the person's interests. Did they enjoy gardening, trains, cooking, sports, travel, animals, music, or attending church? The more personal the content, the more meaningful the experience usually becomes. A simple search often opens the door to wonderful conversations and shared memories.

Whenever possible, I connect the device to a television so the images are larger and easier to see. I also look for videos with a slower pace and calming presentation. Fast moving scenes, loud sound effects, or videos that automatically jump from one topic to another can quickly become overwhelming. Taking time to pause, talk about what we are watching, and simply enjoy the experience together often creates the best moments.

Over the years, I have learned that technology should never replace human connection. It should simply become another tool that helps us share experiences together. Some of my favorite memories have come from sitting beside someone while we watched a train ride through the

mountains, a favorite travel destination, old television programs, worship services, or nature videos. The conversations that followed were often more meaningful than the videos themselves.

Aromatherapy

One of the most fascinating things I have learned about engagement is the powerful connection between smell, memory, and emotion. A familiar scent can instantly transport someone back to a childhood kitchen, a favorite holiday, a family camping trip, or a home they have not seen in decades. Sometimes a single smell unlocks memories long before words ever do.

I have learned that every person experiences scents differently. As dementia and other neurological conditions change the brain, familiar smells may not always be recognized the same way they once were. Rather than correcting someone's response, I simply accept whatever they experience. The goal is not to identify the scent correctly. The goal is to create connection.

One simple approach I have used is placing a familiar scent on a cotton ball inside a small container or jar. Vanilla, coffee, fresh baked cookies, clean laundry, fresh cut grass, cinnamon, or campfire smoke often spark wonderful conversations, but every person has different preferences. I introduce each scent gently and ask simple questions like, "Does this remind you of anything?" or "What does this make you think about?" Then I simply listen.

Some of my favorite aromatherapy experiences have happened naturally. Walking through a garden, smelling fresh bread in the kitchen, standing outside after a summer rain, or folding warm towels fresh from the dryer all provide wonderful opportunities to engage the senses. These everyday experiences often become the beginning of meaningful conversations about family traditions, favorite meals, vacations, holidays, and childhood memories.

Over the years, I have discovered that scent is much more than something we notice. It becomes a doorway into a person's life story. Used thoughtfully and gently, aromatherapy creates opportunities for comfort, conversation, and connection that remind us once again that meaningful engagement often begins with the simplest experiences.

Doll Engagement

Over the years, I have seen many different approaches to engagement, but few generate as much discussion as using a baby doll. Some people immediately embrace the idea, while others are uncomfortable with it. After working with many individuals living with dementia, I have learned that doll engagement is not right for everyone, but when it is right, it can be remarkably meaningful.

I have watched someone who was anxious and restless become calm simply by holding a baby. For reasons we do not completely understand, some individuals experience the baby as very real. When that happens, the love, tenderness, and desire to nurture are genuine. It is often less about the baby itself and more about reconnecting with a role that has been part of someone's identity for many years.

When I introduce a baby, I try to do so naturally. I avoid referring to it as a doll because that can immediately change the experience for someone who believes they are holding a baby. Instead, I simply introduce the baby and allow the interaction to unfold. Some people hold the baby quietly, others rock or talk to it, and many begin sharing stories about raising children or grandchildren. Those conversations often become some of the most meaningful moments of the day.

One thing I have learned is never to assume this activity is only meaningful for women. I have seen fathers and grandfathers become just as engaged. Caring, nurturing, and protecting someone are human experiences, not gender specific ones.

If you choose to use this approach, be willing to participate alongside the person. Talk about the baby, admire the baby's outfit, or help tuck the baby in for a nap. Just as important, think about how you will gently conclude the activity. I often say something like, "I think the baby is getting sleepy. Let's let her rest for a little while." A gentle transition helps bring the experience to a peaceful close while respecting the emotions involved.

Over the years, doll engagement has reminded me of one important truth. Caregiving is not about convincing someone to see the world as we do. It is about meeting them where they are with dignity, compassion, and respect. When approached thoughtfully, a simple baby can become a source of comfort, purpose, and connection.

B I N G O

If there is one activity that has followed me throughout my career, it is Bingo. I have probably called thousands of Bingo games over the years, and no matter where I worked, people always seemed excited when they heard those five familiar letters.

At first glance, Bingo seems like a simple game. Listen for a number, find it on the card, and cover the space. But after years of leading Bingo, I have realized the game is about much more than numbers. It brings people together. It creates laughter, conversation, encouragement, and a wonderful sense of belonging. Even those who are not playing often enjoy sitting nearby and cheering for everyone else.

For individuals living with dementia, Bingo provides gentle opportunities to exercise attention, visual scanning, listening, and hand movement all at the same time. Many people appreciate a little assistance finding numbers or placing their chips, and I have never viewed that as taking away from the game. Helping someone continue participating is part of the experience.

One thing I always remind caregivers is to celebrate often. Every covered number deserves encouragement. Every completed row deserves applause. Every winner deserves a cheer. Those celebrations create confidence and remind people that they are successful. Sometimes the smiles created during the game are far more valuable than the prizes we hand out afterward.

Over the years, I have also learned that Bingo is easy to adapt. Larger cards, picture Bingo, slower pacing, fewer numbers, or homemade versions all work beautifully. The rules can always change because the real purpose is not competition. The real purpose is helping people experience joy together.

After all these years, I still believe Bingo is one of the best reminders that meaningful engagement does not have to be complicated. A few cards, a handful of chips, and a room full of encouragement can create memories that last long after the game is over.

Watching Television

People are often surprised when I tell them that television is not always the relaxing activity we assume it is. Throughout my years working with individuals living with dementia, I have learned that television can sometimes overwhelm rather than comfort.

When we watch television, our brains are constantly processing changing scenes, music, conversations, facial expressions, and sound effects all at once. For someone whose brain is already working hard to make sense of the world, that amount of information can quickly become exhausting. I have seen people become restless or anxious without fully understanding why.

That does not mean television should be avoided. It simply means we should be intentional about what we watch. I have found that slower paced programs with familiar faces, gentle music, and predictable formats work much better than programs filled with constant action or emotional intensity. Older game shows, classic sitcoms, travel programs, nature documentaries, musical performances, *Antiques Roadshow*, and *The Lawrence Welk Show* have all led to wonderful conversations and enjoyable afternoons.

News programs deserve special consideration. While many of us want to stay informed, stories about disasters, violence, or conflict can create fear and anxiety for someone who may not fully understand what they are seeing. The emotions often remain long after the details have been forgotten.

One of my favorite ways to use television is by searching YouTube for favorite singers, comedians, worship services, trains, travel destinations, or places that have special meaning. Sitting together while watching allows us to pause, talk about what we see, laugh together, and share memories that naturally surface along the way.

The greatest lesson television has taught me is that the screen should never become the caregiver. The most meaningful moments happen when we sit together, watch together, and engage together. Television is simply another tool that can help us connect. It is our presence that truly makes the experience meaningful.

Music

If there is one activity that has consistently amazed me throughout my career, it is music. I have watched music reach people when conversation could not. I have seen someone who had spoken very little suddenly begin singing every word to a favorite song. Time after time, music has reminded me that even when memories change, the heart often remembers the melodies that have shaped a lifetime.

One experience made this especially real for me. While traveling on a train in France, a man stood up, set a guitar case on the floor, connected a small speaker, and began to play. I remember thinking, "Great, now I have to listen to this." Then he started playing songs from the 1980s. Almost instantly, everything changed. Before I realized it, I was singing along. Other passengers began tapping their feet, smiling, and quietly joining in. Suddenly I was no longer sitting on a train in France. I was back in middle school, remembering school dances, my torn jeans, and what life felt like during those years. For a few wonderful moments, a train full of strangers became connected through memories and music.

That experience helped me understand something I had already witnessed countless times in senior living. Music has an incredible ability to unlock emotions and memories that seem hidden away. We celebrate birthdays with music. We get married to music. We worship through music. We dance, laugh, cry, and remember because of music. It becomes woven into nearly every important chapter of our lives.

Over the years, I have watched familiar songs bring people to life. Someone who appeared withdrawn begins tapping a finger to the rhythm. Another quietly mouths every word to a favorite hymn. Someone else begins smiling as they remember a song they once danced to with their spouse. Those moments are never just about the music. They are about reconnecting with a part of themselves that still remains.

When choosing music, I always think about the person's story. What songs were popular during their teenage years? What did they sing in church? What music played at family gatherings, weddings, or celebrations? The more personal the music, the more meaningful the experience often becomes.

Music does not have to fill the room to be effective. Sometimes one familiar song is enough. Sometimes humming together, tapping a rhythm on the table, or quietly listening is all that is needed. There is no pressure to sing or perform. The gift of music is simply being present together while it gently opens the door to memories, emotions, and connection.

After all these years, I still believe music is one of God's greatest gifts. It reminds us that while memories may change, joy, love, and hope often remain close enough for a familiar melody to bring them home.

Arranging Flowers

Flowers have a wonderful way of brightening both a room and the people inside it. Over the years, I have found that arranging flowers is much more than a craft activity. It becomes an opportunity to slow down, enjoy beauty, and spend meaningful time together.

Whenever I bring flowers into a room, conversation seems to begin naturally. We talk about favorite gardens, flowers that grew outside childhood homes, weddings, Mother's Day bouquets, holidays, or memories of working in the yard. Sometimes the scent of a flower brings back a story that has not been shared in years. Other times we simply enjoy admiring the colors and textures together.

If we have a vase available, I enjoy arranging the flowers side by side. I invite the person to choose where each flower belongs, and I remind myself that there is no perfect arrangement. The goal is not creating something worthy of a flower show. The goal is creating an experience where someone feels involved, creative, and successful.

As with every activity, safety remains important. I keep an eye on anyone who may mistake flowers or plants for something edible and gently redirect if necessary. Beyond that, I try not to overcomplicate the experience. A few flowers, a vase, and an unhurried conversation are often all that is needed.

One of my favorite parts comes after the arrangement is finished. We place it somewhere everyone can enjoy it, and each time we walk by, it reminds us of the time we spent creating it together. That simple bouquet becomes more than a decoration. It becomes a memory.

Like so many of the activities in this journal, arranging flowers has taught me that meaningful engagement is rarely about the finished product. It is about the conversations we share, the smiles we create, and the moments of connection that grow while our hands are busy. Sometimes something as simple as a handful of flowers can brighten an entire day.

A Final Encouragement

As you finish this journal, I hope you leave with one important reminder: there is no single right way to engage another person.

Every individual has their own story, interests, personality, and life experiences. What brings one person joy may not interest someone else at all. That is why one of the greatest skills a caregiver can develop is curiosity. Be willing to try new ideas. Be creative. Ask questions. Observe. Pay attention to what makes the person smile, what captures their attention, and what brings them a sense of peace or purpose.

Some activities will be successful the very first time. Others may not work at all. That does not mean you have failed. It simply means you have learned something about the person you are caring for. Tomorrow is another opportunity to try again in a different way.

There will also be days when nothing seems to work. Every caregiver experiences those moments. Please do not become discouraged or frustrated. Dementia and many other health conditions change from day to day, and sometimes even from hour to hour. An activity that brought laughter yesterday may not hold the same interest today. Be flexible. Adapt. Follow the person's lead instead of expecting them to follow yours.

Remember, engagement is not measured by how many activities you complete or how long someone participates. It is measured by the moments you share together. A smile, a laugh, a conversation, a song, a quiet walk, holding hands, or simply sitting together in comfortable silence can be just as meaningful as any planned activity.

Above all, remember that the person you are spending time with is far more important than the activity itself. Activities are simply tools that help build relationships. Your kindness, patience, encouragement, and willingness to be fully present are what truly make the difference.

Thank you for allowing me to share what I have learned over more than twenty five years of serving alongside older adults, caregivers, and families. The residents I have met have been some of my greatest teachers. They have shown me that engagement is not about filling time. It is about honoring people, celebrating their abilities, and helping them experience purpose, joy, and connection.

I hope these ideas inspire you to create some of your own. Some of the very best engagement activities have never been written in a book. They are discovered in everyday moments by caregivers who love deeply, pay attention, and are willing to meet people exactly where they are.

May you continue to care with patience, creativity, and compassion. And may you never underestimate the difference you make by simply showing up, sharing your time, and reminding another person that they are seen, valued, and loved.