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THE GIFT OF RECEIVING: LEARNING TO ACCEPT HELP



By [Vicki Rackner, M.D.](#)

As my house burned down, I must have had that deer-in-the-headlights look. The same look of shock I saw on the faces of my patients and their family members as they heard bad medical news.

Although I have delivered bad news to patients about terminal or long-term illness, I have not experienced this loss for myself. Yet losing my home and my possessions helped me understand, to some degree, what my patients, and their families, may feel.

As I dealt with the ravages of the fire, I saw how much I shared with those brave patients and caregivers dealing with losses of their own. The loss of my house was not as devastating as the loss of a loved one, or the terrible news of a terminal illness, but the overwhelming sense of dread, helplessness, and panic I felt was one my patients could identify with.

Accepting Help in Times of Need

My biggest challenge was the same one voiced by many caregivers: How do I care for myself when there's so much to do? How do I graciously receive assistance? I have spent most of my life giving; recovery from the fire was a crash course in *accepting* help.

I don't like to ask for help. Yet, I could not recover from the fire alone. My house needed to be rebuilt. All of my possessions needed to be replaced. I had to help my young son deal with this trauma. My circumstances required me to accept help. This is not unlike many caregivers: strong people who otherwise would not dream of accepting help. But without accepting help, we endanger our own well-being.

As a physician I know that a healthy life is a life of balance. A life of balance includes both the ability to give and receive.

Some forms of receiving came more easily than others. I welcomed the firefighters with open arms. Words cannot capture my gratitude for the acts of these brave men and women who put their lives on the line to help others – to help ME. Despite the embarrassment of my son, I often approach firefighters in any city in the country and thank them for their dedication and service. It may be easier to accept help when you're in the midst of a crisis and you cannot get out of it yourself. You may feel that way about a doctor or a nurse who performed a life-saving procedure for your loved one.

It was also relatively easy to accept the help from those who were hired to perform the tasks outlined in my homeowner's policy. I have paid insurance premiums for years to get support in a situation such as this, in a similar way that your loved one's medical insurance policy offers a set of services. You may find it easier to accept the services once you realize you have, in fact, been paying for them.

Making a List Makes it Easier to Accept Help

It was also fairly easy to accept the gifts that were delivered to my door...the bags of clothes and books and toys from my son's school, or the many generous acts of kindness from friends. If such offers of kindness are extended to you as a caregiver, accept them.

But in my time of need, when many open-hearted friends and neighbors asked, "What can I do to help?" I never knew what to say. Sure, my to-do list was a mile long, but I did not know how to break it down into tasks that could be performed by others. I soon realized that making a wishlist of clearly-defined needs can help. Your wish may be to ask a friend, "How about if we go out to dinner and not even mention the fire?" or, "May I call you when I need someone to listen?" or "If you're shopping and you see a spring-form baking pan, could you buy it for me and I'll pay you back?"

It may help you to make your own wish list. Write down the daily tasks that you may need help with. Could a neighbor bring you leftovers? Could someone pick up some toiletries from the local store for you? Could a friend help with the laundry once a week? When you start tallying up all those "little things," you may find you could use a lot more help!

Appreciating the Little Things & Standing up for Your Needs

By some miracle, my garden was spared from the ravages of fire. I consider these plants part of my family, a belief the construction workers did not share. They trampled my plants, crushed them as they threw debris out of the house, broke huge canes of roses, and more. I asked them to be more respectful of my plants, even when I knew that this made their job a bit more challenging. I did not feel guilty about this. After all, I reminded myself, they were working for me.

You may want home care workers to come at a certain time of the day, or to address your loved one in a certain way. You may insist on early-morning appointments, or another convenient time for you, with healthcare professionals. Your time is valuable too! Please keep in mind that doctors and nurses are there to serve you; you are the customer, even though it often feels as if you are there to make the job of the doctor easier.

Think of standing up for yourself as your gift to you. Accepting help from others is part of the balance of life, and loving yourself and caring for you is another part.

Learning to receive was my spiritual lesson. I reminded myself how good I felt when I contribute to the lives of others. I remind myself that accepting the gifts from others helps the givers feel just as good.

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