



# FaithLink

Connecting Faith and Life

## Caregivers by Jessica Petersen



The COVID-19 pandemic has brought increased attention to the vast number of people who serve as caregivers. Who are the caregivers in our society? What new challenges has the pandemic presented for caregivers? How can communities of faith work together to care for caregivers?

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### Caregivers Are Weary

Caregiving is challenging and exhausting under any circumstances. But during the COVID-19 pandemic, the work of caregiving has intensified as help has been stripped away and the demands of caregiving have increased. Caregivers are stretched thinner than ever and are left struggling, without respite or assistance.

Caregivers primarily fall into two categories: informal family caregivers and healthcare professionals. Informal family caregivers are those caring for children and teenagers, as well as those caring for adults who are ill, aging, or have special needs. Healthcare professionals include doctors, nurses, medical specialists, rehabilitation and nursing home caregivers, mental health providers, and paid in-home caregivers. For many caregivers, their circumstances are complicated as they embody multiple caregiving roles. Those in the “sandwich generation” are caught between parenting children while also caring for older adults. Similarly, healthcare professionals may also be caring for children, teens, or adult relatives at home, in addition to their professional work.

#### REFLECT

- Who are the caregivers in your life? Are they struggling right now? What are they struggling with?
- Throughout the pandemic, have you heard more about the challenges of family caregivers or healthcare professionals? What have you heard?

## Challenges the Pandemic Presents for Caregivers

“Caregiving is hard to start with. But given isolation, (and the) inability to access services (because of the quarantine), it’s made it even more difficult,” said Scott Beach, who is studying the pandemic’s impact on caregivers in his role as director of survey research at the University of Pittsburgh’s Center for Social and Urban Research. “It’s gone from a tough situation to even worse,” said Beach. Studies have found that caregivers are experiencing increased rates of depression, anxiety, sleep issues, and stress-related illnesses. Add the financial burdens of caregiving to pandemic-related employment challenges, and, according to Dr. Jamila Bookwala, professor of psychology at Lafayette College, “We’re talking about the brewing of—I don’t want to call it perfect—it’s the imperfect storm. This is going to take a toll for a long, long time.”

Most parents and others caring for children and teens are used to having help—from friends, babysitters, churches, and community programs—in addition to daycare and in-person school. Now, that help has either been stripped away entirely or comes with significant risks when it is available. Some parents have lost jobs or income and cannot afford the help they need, even if it is available to them. Parents who are working from home are multitasking constantly, which is exhausting and unproductive. Many parents now play a larger role in their child’s education, embodying dual roles of both parent and teacher. It is also challenging for parents to meet their children’s social and emotional needs, leaving a significant number of children and teens struggling with mental health and/or behavioral issues caused by the disruptions the pandemic has created. As a result, parents’ mental health is also suffering, and it is nearly impossible to take a break when everything from school to extracurriculars and church happens inside the home.

Those who take care of adults who are ill, aging, or have special needs have also lost access to

the help they are accustomed to from family members, friends, community programs, and in-home caregivers. Because those they care for are usually considered high-risk for COVID-19, the risk of exposure outweighs the benefits of help, and many caregivers have taken on additional duties to keep their loved one safe. These precautions contribute to isolation and declining mental health. Some of these caregivers suffer physically from lifting or assisting their loved one, leading to back pain or other injuries. Additionally, it is challenging for many of these caregivers to take care of their own health by exercising or attending medical appointments because they cannot leave their loved one alone, which leads to further declines in the caregiver’s physical health. The pandemic has also made it challenging for these caregivers to continue living their lives outside of caregiving, as they need to take so many precautions to keep their loved one safe.

Healthcare professionals are experiencing their own set of challenges. In their workplaces, healthcare professionals are experiencing intense amounts of stress, overwork, and personal risk. Many are concerned about becoming ill with COVID-19 or bringing the virus home to their families. They have the added burden of donning personal protective equipment and sanitizing everything they touch as they work. Due to the cancellation of elective procedures and delayed medical care by many, some healthcare professionals also face furloughs, impacting their finances. Others have had to make the choice between working or caring for a family member. Mental health professionals are also overwhelmed with requests for their services and are juggling packed schedules and the competing needs of their clients.

### *REFLECT*

- If you are a caregiver, what challenges are you currently facing? How have these challenges changed during the pandemic?
- What did you learn about the challenges that caregivers are facing during the pandemic? What, if anything, surprised you?

## Caring for Caregivers

Most caregivers realize that self-care is essential for the work of caregiving, but under the current circumstances, many caregivers need help from others to make this possible. How can communities of faith work together to care for caregivers, particularly during the pandemic?

In addition to wearing our masks and making safe choices to stop the spread of COVID-19—which would open doors to the types of help that caregivers need most—faith communities can make personal connections with caregivers. Individuals can provide companionship and a listening ear by regularly asking caregivers how they are doing, not just how the person they care for is doing. Although some caregivers may not know what they need or are reluctant to accept help, it’s vital to ask caregivers what they need with an intention to find a way to safely meet their needs. When safe and possible to do so, provide caregivers with a break—even if that means sitting with their

loved one outside on the porch, masked, while the caregiver takes some time alone.

For family caregivers, faith communities can provide meals, run errands, and do other tasks that make life more manageable. People of all ages can pray, send cards or care packages, and bring joy and encouragement through video messages. Although these efforts may seem small, caregivers benefit from knowing someone is thinking about them personally. Churches that have support groups or other similar ministries can leverage these to provide support for caregivers, as an offering of love and compassion for those who are used to giving rather than receiving.

### *REFLECT*

- What small thing can you do this week to care for a caregiver? If you are a caregiver, who can you look to for help?
- What larger thing can you plan to do to help a caregiver, or multiple caregivers, beyond this week?

## Core Bible Passages

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, “Happy are people who show mercy, because they will receive mercy” (Matthew 5:7). Some people choose to be caregivers because caring for others comes naturally to them. Others did not set out to be caregivers, but became caregivers for family members out of necessity. Whatever their path to caregiving, those who serve as caregivers extend mercy to another, or possibly many others, on a daily basis through loving and compassionate care.

Every day caregivers offer themselves to others, giving selflessly of their time and energy. Their offering brings to mind the poor widow Jesus lauded in the temple (Luke 21:1-4), who gave two small coins, all she had to live on. While the subject of this short narrative is money, it is a metaphor for discipleship. The act of giving abundantly in service to God and others, trusting that there will still be enough, is the work that caregivers do every day.

We know from Acts 6:1-7 that the early church appointed individuals to care for the community on behalf of the apostles. The twelve were occupied with teaching the Word of God and could not manage the important work of caring for the community on their own. In the church today, pastors and church staff also have a lot of work to do. The community can join them in ministry by helping to fulfill the work of caring for others within the church, especially caregivers.

### *REFLECT*

- How have you experienced God’s mercy as a result of another person’s care for you?
- In what area of your life is God calling you to be more like the woman who offered all she had to God?

## Healthcare Professionals Caring for COVID-19 Patients Face Unique Challenges

Healthcare professionals caring directly for COVID-19 patients are overwhelmed and exhausted, and many are experiencing burnout as they work extremely long hours, take extra shifts, and witness levels of mortality among their patients many have never seen before.

Additionally, many physicians are faced daily with agonizing decisions about how best to care for COVID-19 patients, and how to prioritize the competing needs of critically ill patients. In the midst of these intense circumstances, doctors and nurses are struggling. Suicide rates for critical-care providers have increased, while others are simply leaving the field.

Those who care for COVID-19 patients are also standing in for family members who cannot visit their loved ones, facilitating video calls with patients' family members, and ensuring patients do not die alone. Hospital chaplains join in this work of caring for patients and their families as well.

Chaplains have the unique experience of witnessing firsthand what healthcare professionals are going through, and many chaplains' work has shifted to focus significant time and effort on providing emotional and spiritual support to hospital staff.

What can we do to help? In the words of Dr. Sarah Anderson, an OB/GYN in Colorado: "I've been talking with a lot of my colleagues about how the public is saying, 'Thank you for being on the front lines,' they're writing us thank-you notes and sending us pizza. . . . We don't need any of that. What we need is for you to stop exposing us."

### *REFLECT*

- What have you heard about the unique challenges facing those caring for COVID-19 patients? What surprised you here?
- Is there a change you can make in your life to reduce your possibility of spreading COVID-19?

## United Methodist Perspective

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, considered works of piety—such as worship and receiving the Lord's Supper—and works of mercy—like visiting the sick and feeding the hungry—to be means of grace that were of equal importance for sanctification. In his sermon, "The Means of Grace" (1746), Wesley taught: "By 'means of grace' I understand outward signs, words, or actions, ordained of God, and appointed for this end, to be the ordinary channels whereby he might convey to men, preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace."

Quoting Matthew 25 in his sermon, "On Visiting the Sick" (1786), Wesley insisted that works of mercy, as well as works of piety, are necessary for salvation. Urging his followers to visit the sick, Wesley instructed: "By the sick, I do not mean only those that keep their bed, or that are sick in the strictest sense. Rather I would include all such as are in a state of affliction, whether of mind or body." Given the mental and physical challenges caregivers are experiencing during the pandemic, it is fair to say that caregivers of all types are—to use Wesley's terms—afflicted in mind or body. They need our care. Faith communities can extend God's compassion and mercy to caregivers by caring for them individually and by bringing caregivers together for mutual support.

### *REFLECT*

- In what ways does your church currently care for caregivers?
- If your church facilitates support groups, what groups of caregivers are included? Are there gaps? If your church does not offer support groups, would it be possible to start them?

## Helpful Links

- “For family caregivers, COVID-19 is a mental health crisis in the making,” from *USA Today*: <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/elections/2020/10/17/family-caregivers-struggle-added-mental-stress-covid-19/5953020002/>
- “Changing How We Provide Care: Lessons Learned from the Pandemic,” for family caregivers, from AARP: <https://www.aarp.org/caregiving/basics/info-2020/planning-ahead-during-covid.html>
- “What the Chaos in Hospitals is Doing to Doctors,” from *The Atlantic*: <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2021/01/covid-ethics-committee/617261/>

## About the Writer

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### Local Citizenship

by Benjamin Dueholm

As political conversations have become more national in scope, they have also become more polarized. But most decisions that shape our lives are made by local and state governments. What has led to this shift? What does local citizenship look like in a polarized world? How does our faith guide us as we work for the good of our literal neighbors?



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