

Catholic Caregivers

'Caregiving is pro-life!'

Turning to Prayer

It seems strange to say it's possible for something good to come out of something as terrible as a loved one's ever-worsening condition. But it's true. It can.

Caught up in everyday living, it's easy to forget—and to ignore—what's important. What really matters. Taking care of a loved one changes that. Being a caregiver brings you face to face with mortality.

It's not surprising then that a care-receiver and caregiver can be drawn toward prayer. If this hasn't been a central part of your loved one's life or your life for a time (if ever), praying can feel awkward. Just the thought of praying can make you feel uncomfortable. How do you start? What do you say?

Even if you're accustomed to praying, this might be different. Maybe prayer has always been something very personal and private for you and for your loved one, but now you two would like to pray together.

Where to begin?

Prayer has been defined as lifting the mind and the heart to God. That's easier to do when your mind is filled with concern for a loved one. When your heart is breaking as you watch him or her slip away.

Praying isn't complicated. There are no formulas that have to be followed. "Thee" and "thou" aren't necessary. Praying is telling God, "This is what's on my mind." "This is why my heart is aching." "This is what I'm so grateful for."

It's turning to the one who created your parent (your spouse, your child, your family member, your friend), turning to the one *who loves him or her even more than you do*—and that doesn't seem possible!—and asking for help, for comfort, for strength.

Your prayers may change as your loved one's condition goes through stages. The focus of your prayers may shift. That's all right. For a time it may be "heal him." And that might happen. At another time it may become, "Yes, I know he's going to die, but just not now. Please. Later." And you may reach a point in your prayers when you ask God, "Let him go peacefully. When it's his time, let him go and welcome him into heaven."

But there may also be periods when what is happening is so overwhelming—so frightening, so awful—that your own words just won't come. Many caregivers in that situation have discovered silently repeating the prayers they learned as children—the Our Father, the Hail Mary—can bring comfort. Some who

haven't said the Rosary for years are surprised to find that can be especially helpful.

If your loved one wants to pray out loud with you, saying an Our Father, Hail Mary or a Rosary can be a good place to begin. (Also, keep in mind, there are prayers on audio tape, CDs, and computer mp3 downloads.) It's easier than worrying about coming up with the "right" words or avoiding the "wrong" ones.

Your loved one may surprise you with the number of prayers and hymns he or she remembers. It's not uncommon that someone with a significant short-term memory loss can easily, and happily, recall what he or she memorized as a child.

It also helps to keep in mind a personal shared prayer doesn't have to be long or complicated. "Heavenly Father, bless my dear wife (mom, daughter, friend) and me. Thank you for letting us be a part of each other's lives. Give us strength for whatever lies ahead."

Even if your family has never been the touching-hugging type, holding hands with your loved one as you pray may feel right, may be very comforting, for both of you.

Then, too, there may be times when it helps to turn to "silent" prayer. For you, or for your loved one, to pray privately. Again, it may be holding her hand or it may be sitting beside his bed as he sleeps and, in silence, telling God what you're thinking and what you're feeling. Asking for, listening for, God's voiceless words of comfort and encouragement.

Although Catholics traditionally haven't been strong on privately reading the Bible, this is another kind of spoken prayer you both might find helpful. Try something from one of the Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke or John. They're filled with Jesus' words of love.

And it may be your loved one has a particular rosary, medal, crucifix or prayer book he or she wants to have nearby and go with him or her to the hospital or nursing home.

But what if you don't feel like praying and your loved one asks you to? Do it, if only as a favor to him or her. It probably means a lot to him or her. And, later, after your loved one is gone, having done it may mean a lot to you.

Are you being hypocritical if you turn to prayer now? No. Just the opposite. You're being true to how you feel. People change. What you're going through is changing you in many ways. It shouldn't be surprising that includes spiritually. □