



TOMPKINS COUNTY  
**OFFICE FOR THE AGING**

*Aging Better, Together*

Hi Everyone,

I came across this article the other day and thought it would be great to share with caregivers, and more importantly, family and friends of caregivers, who may be wondering what they can do to help their family caregiver during Thanksgiving, throughout the Holiday Season, and beyond.

On behalf of all of us here at the Tompkins County Office for the Aging, I would like to sincerely thank all family caregivers for the unrivaled love and compassion they provide each day.

Thank you,

Rodney Maine  
Aging Services Specialist  
Tompkins County Office for the Aging



## **Giving Thanks to Family Caregivers During and After Thanksgiving**

In addition to cards and flowery toasts, lend help whenever you can

by Barry J. Jacobs

Imagine a Thanksgiving family dinner, in person or a virtual gathering, at which the oldest adult son calls for everyone's attention before sitting forward in his chair with wineglass in hand to toast his mother. "Mom," he says, "thank you from the bottoms of our hearts for all you do for all of us, but especially our dad. You take such good care of

him. We are eternally grateful for you.” Everyone else murmurs in agreement. There is raising of glasses all around. Mom blushes in embarrassment as Dad faintly smiles at her. “Let’s start eating before everything gets cold,” Mom says. On cue, everyone starts digging into their thickly sliced turkey and buttery mashed potatoes with gusto.

Sounds like an ideal scene, right? A family caregiver is **finally being recognized**. But as Mom jumps up to head into the kitchen to get more cranberry sauce, it occurs to her she has heard this toast before, during the last two Thanksgiving dinners. She doesn’t doubt its genuineness; she knows her oldest son means it. But she can’t keep from remembering that this son has been so busy with a new job and caring for his own children that he hasn’t helped her and his father much from one holiday season to the next. When she dropped hints months ago that Dad seemed **sad and lonely** and could use some friendly company, even if only by phone, her son seemed to ignore them. Mom isn’t resentful — not exactly. But the yearly expression of thanks sounds a bit hollow to her when it isn’t backed up with deeds of appreciation.

Is Mom being ungrateful — at Thanksgiving, no less — for her family’s heartfelt acknowledgment of the many sacrifices she makes and the love and devotion she demonstrates year-round? No, she savors their kind words. But, like many family caregivers, she wishes for more. She doesn’t need her own Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade with marching bands and floats. Being admired on special occasions, though, doesn’t do her that much good. On most days, she still feels **isolated and forgotten**, buried under arduous caregiving.

What are other ways for family members to give thanks to caregivers during the holiday season and the rest of the year? Here are some ideas.

### **Provide hands-on assistance**

The saying “actions speak louder than words” is trite but true, especially when it comes to family caregiving. There is a long list of caregiving tasks to be completed each day for which **helping hands** would matter greatly. In the face of seemingly endless care-receiver need, thank-yous are nice but make less difference than would direct participation in care.

What actions can family members take to help caregivers feel like they are getting back even a little of the care they generously give? While it’s best to ask the primary caregiver what would truly be helpful, an in-person Thanksgiving feast (masked this year, of course) could be an excellent opportunity for delivering more hands-on assistance. Rather than sitting around watching football and waiting for the caregiver to make and serve the meal, family members can set the table, cut the string beans, brew the coffee and, finally, scrub the pots. For a Zoom family gathering, a family member could help organize the

menu everyone will follow, perhaps pick up and distribute groceries or order in a special meal. No eloquent toast would be nearly as uplifting for the caregiver.

## **Give time**

In general, family caregivers scramble hurriedly through their days with little time to rest, do errands, or talk with friends. The greatest show of thanks for them is the gift of time. When family members commit to spending one socially distant afternoon a week or a month with the care receiver, the caregiver gets a break as well as the satisfaction of knowing the family member really cares.

Meanwhile, the hours spent with the care receiver will give family members increased understanding of the challenges of caregiving and even greater appreciation for all the caregiver does.

## **Ease concerns about being a 'burden'**

No one likes to inconvenience others. Many family caregivers feel similarly, afraid that if they accept help from family members, especially adult children, they'll be burdening them and interfering with their relationships and careers. Even on Thanksgiving, they may shoo family members out of the kitchen or decline other offers of assistance, saying it's not their job to help with the event. But family members should hold their ground. They need to reassure the caregiver she's not a burden to them. They need to be persuasive that expressing thanks is fine but showing thanks is better — a joy and a privilege. It is through the simple action of helping that they can give meaning to the words of gratitude they say annually each holiday season.

*Barry J. Jacobs, a clinical psychologist, family therapist and healthcare consultant, is the co-author of Love and Meaning After 50: The 10 Challenges to Great Relationships — and How to Overcome Them and AARP Meditations for Caregivers (Da Capo, 2016). Follow him on Twitter and Facebook.*

You can view this article on the web:

<https://www.aarp.org/caregiving/basics/info-2020/showing-thanks-to-family-caregivers.html?intcmp=AE-HP-TTN-R4-POS1-REALPOSS-TODAY>

