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Winter 2011-2012

Family Visits Offer a Unique Holiday Hangover

By Steve Emmer, MSW

Every year, shortly after the holidays, care consultants nationwide receive a barrage of phone calls from people concerned about elders in their families. I've come to view this as the *Caregiving Family Holiday Hangover Syndrome*.



Steve Emmer, MSW

Oh, the holiday parties and family gatherings! We look forward to the joy of reuniting with close friends and family. These occasions sometimes bring about traditional hangovers brought on by excessive consumption.

However, some of us will experience the feelings of a hangover without ever touching a drop. You may wonder, "What's wrong with Mom? The house is a mess, she's wearing a dirty dress, and it looks like the mail hasn't been opened in months. She keeps repeating the same questions...." You might feel overwhelmed, helpless and your head starts to ache.

Mom may not have mentioned her difficulties, and you may wonder when a change occurred. Physical and mental decline can occur slowly, but not always. Throughout the year, changes in abilities may go unnoticed. Even when problems are suspected by a long-distance caregiver, they are hard to confirm without a face-to-face visit. Indeed, your loved one (and perhaps a partner or other family member) may deny, downplay, or intentionally cover up changes in capacity and ability. This tendency to hide difficulties is not uncommon. We tend to get embarrassed and ashamed when asking for help, in particular when it signifies losing some independence.

Holiday visits are an ideal opportunity to take note of significant changes at home. Is Mom's once pristine house cluttered and dirty? Do you see overflowing trash, unopened bills, detect odors or spoiled food? Do you witness evidence of falls or problems with balance? These are signals that more supports are in order.

It's true our daily routines are disrupted by the demands of the holidays and our memories may be taxed when attending holiday religious services or meeting extended family. But people with declining capacities depend heavily on routine, and such disruptions may exaggerate displays of memory lapses, mistaken identity, confusion and indecision.

On the flip side, increased positive interactions during the holidays can ease isolation and depression. Someone who has been extremely withdrawn and neglecting self care may summon the ability to appear alert and independent. To develop a more complete picture, complement your first-hand observations and phone conversations with reports by other members of your family, friends and neighbors. Attend your mother's house of worship for additional insights from its members and leaders.

You may discover conflicting information in your research; you may be worried about your mother but your siblings may think she is fine. It's not uncommon for family members to disagree about the significance of these warning signs. A trusted professional can shed light on the matter and avert a burgeoning crisis. Geriatricians and geriatric care consultants can assess an elder's situation and make recommendations toward improving an elder's health, safety, and happiness in the New Year. They might just be a cure for that hangover.

Steve Emmer, MSW, has 20 years' experience at Full Life Care and is Director of Care Consultation. Contact Steve at (206) 224-3768, stevee@fulllifecare.org.

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MS Achievers Support Each Other at Full Life

Our Snohomish County Adult Day Health Center recently moved from its south Everett location to downtown Everett.

The new site has multiple activity rooms, dedicated occupational therapy space and offices for small meetings. In addition to programs for elders and persons with developmental disabilities, it also houses our MS Achievement Center and Heads Up Program, our specialized adult day health programs for persons living with multiple sclerosis or an acquired brain injury.



Jon Carlson, Jodie Erwin and Karen Griffith

Sitting down in one of our new meeting spaces, Karen Griffith, Jon Carlson and Jodie Erwin share their thoughts as participants in the MS Achievement Center.

“I’ve been coming for a very long time, at least five years,” Karen says. “I learned about it when I was riding the DART (paratransit) bus to another appointment and we made a stop at the old Full Life location. I asked a guy on the bus about the program and he told me about the activities. I wrote down the phone number, called my social worker

and enrolled right away.”

“I like the exercises,” continues Karen. “I know it’s made me stronger and helped my lungs too. When another woman quit smoking here, I quit too, and that really helped my breathing!”

Jodie likes the physical activity too, and, as the mother of a 10-year-old, maintaining her fitness is additionally important. “The exercises help me walk better, and I like to walk the

dogs with my son. We go swimming too.”

Peer support is quite evident with this cohort. Karen compliments Jon on his abilities to complete puzzles and other cognitive exercises, and Jon talks about the friendships he’s made over the course of several years. “I enjoy most everyone here,” Jon says, “even if I don’t always remember their names.”

Jon and Jodie kid each other good-naturedly throughout the discussion and finally Jodie points out, “We’re all here together. It’s like we’re family.”

DayBreak Senior Respite Care is a Family Affair

In 1992, Teri deKubber-Danner was fresh out of college with a degree in recreational therapy when she was hired to run DayBreak Senior Respite Care, Full Life’s specialized adult day program for persons with memory loss in Snohomish County.

Participants enjoy music, crafts and mild exercise in a safe and comfortable environment. With nearly 20 years’ experience in the program, Teri loves welcoming people into the program and fostering new friendships between the participants. She keeps current on new activities through education at the Alzheimer’s Association and relies heavily on activities that bring the most meaning to the lives of participants.

Teri also gets a little help from her mother, Peggy deKubber. “Mom had recently retired from teaching when I started with DayBreak,” Teri recalls. “She dropped by to see the program and fell in love with it.” Peggy now volunteers both at DayBreak and the adult day health center.

In April, Peggy received one of the Governor’s Volunteer Service Awards, which recognize “the countless acts of service performed by one of Washington’s most valuable assets – its volunteers.”

DayBreak is offered in the cities of Snohomish and Edmonds, and Teri hopes to reopen a Mill Creek site, where she needs just a few more people on the waiting list before she



Peggy deKubber with Governor Chris Gregoire

can launch the program.

Moe Pocha, program manager for Full Life’s Snohomish County Adult Day Health Center, says Teri will continue to bring DayBreak to communities that need respite care. “Teri’s incredibly organized and passionate,” Moe says, “it’s just phenomenal.”

Sharing Lifetimes Through Storytelling

In a sunny room surrounded by glass, Margaret Binnendyk and Gladys Rogers talk like old friends. Gladys' house sits on a hill in Edmonds overlooking Puget Sound. As sailboats pass behind her, she tells about the time her late husband, in his usual breakfast chair, saw a cargo ship come in from a storm with crates out of place or missing. She remembers being teased by her daughter about her meticulous housecleaning, and discusses plans to adopt a second cat. Margaret gives an update on her week, and tells about the time she came for a visit and a playful Gladys told her through the door, "We don't want any!"

After a long and exciting career with a cruise line, a year traveling, and a year in shock over the change of retirement, Margaret sought a volunteer opportunity with ElderFriends. She was matched with Gladys in fall 2010, and what began as an every-other-Tuesday visit quickly became a weekly highlight.

"It really opens up my day and makes it brighter. It meets a need. It fills a gap," explains Gladys. Each confessed to being nervous before their first scheduled visit, but felt an instant connection once they began talking. The two go out to lunch at their favorite restaurant, work on the garden, and play with Margaret's dog. Often they just sit and have long conversations. After a lifetime of travel, Margaret loves reliving her experiences with Gladys, who told Margaret, "Sometimes I can feel like I'm there with you when you tell a story."

Both view the volunteer experience as a happy accident that introduced two good friends. In "Gladys," her affectionate pet name, Margaret has found a family. "I never married or had children, so through her stories I can experience that. I get to see the other side," says Margaret. Her friends have said she glows whenever she talks about Gladys. She finds hope in Gladys' optimism, and appreciates her positive attitude.

The two have supported each other through medical issues, the passing of friends, and all of life's changes. They have met family members and are a permanent part of each other's life. Gladys says, "Margaret is so warm and outgoing. She's ready to laugh, and I guess that's optimism, too."

Turning to her friend, Margaret declares, "I have such admiration for you."

"Why?" asks a shocked Gladys.

"You're always just so lovely and put together," replies Margaret. "I just hope I'm like you at 90. I'm taking lessons!"



Gladys Rogers and Margaret Binnendyk



Sofia Truffat shares a heartfelt conversation with a Bertschi student.

Giving Thanks with ElderFriends

Life's simple pleasures – close friends, laughter and good food in pleasant surroundings – are the basis of ElderFriends, Full Life Care's volunteer companionship program. This Thanksgiving, 60 volunteers will deliver holiday meals and spend time visiting with their ElderFriends. The Millionaire Club Charity prepares dinner, QFC provides dessert, Ballard Blossom furnishes a lovely rose, and the meal is offered up on a beautiful placemat made by a first grade student from Bertschi School.

The Capitol Hill school has partnered with ElderFriends for nearly 15 years. In recent years, students have received an intergenerational visit from an ElderFriends participant before working on their Thanksgiving placemats. This year, ElderFriends AmeriCorps member Alison Spanner accompanied ElderFriends participant Sofia Truffat to speak to the combined first grade classes of teachers Jill Corsi and Andrew Fox.

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Benefit Breakfast Raises Over \$160,000

On October 18, Full Life Care hosted its most successful fundraising event at the Washington State Convention Center. Over 600 benefactors turned out to support our mission. Thanks to Breakfast Chair Jesse Bond and 60 hardworking table captains, the room was full with barely an empty seat. William H. Gates, Sr. and Nancy Hooyman, Ph.D. had a conversation about aging, caregiving and his vision for a healthy community. Visit www.fulllifecare.org to watch our video that premiered at the event, and see our event pictures at www.facebook.com/fulllifecare. Thank you to everyone who made this event a resounding success!

Left: Jesse Bond and William H. Gates, Sr.

Thank you to our sponsors, who underwrote all costs of the event

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TABLE CAPTAINS

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Basia Belza, Ph.D.

Lisa Bergstrom

Karen and Bob Bliesner

Loui and Jay Bond

Jesse Bond

Sue and Mike Brandeberry

Rick Brown

Rosemary Coleman

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Anne and Randy Neely

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Jeff Nomi

Mike Olson

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Moe Pocha

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Anne Shayler

Dan Smerken

Anne Stabler

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Giving Thanks with ElderFriends

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After a brief explanation of the ElderFriends program and the Thanksgiving meal service, Truffat spoke about her life and her art to the group of 30 children. Born and educated in Argentina, she has since traveled the world and raised a family of two children and four grandchildren. She loves to paint with watercolor and sing in her church choir.

Addressing her students, Corsi said, "When we work on our community service in two weeks, we'll be making placemats for people like Sofia. We can think about her while we're making them."

A few of Truffat's framed paintings and prints were displayed on a desk behind her. When she told the children she had made them herself, the room erupted with gasps. The students proceeded to ask numerous questions about how she painted and her cultural background.

Of the visit, Truffat said, "It was just a beautiful, wonderful experience. They all seemed to be so intelligent and so involved, and they asked some very smart questions about art. It's especially important for me because I'm an older person, and many times I feel lonely. Although I'm 76, I like to act younger. These things kind of perk me up."

A Courageous Tale

NORA'S CORNER



By Nora Gibson, Executive Director

I recently joined the board of the National Multiple Sclerosis Society, Greater Northwest Chapter. This wonderful organization raises funds for research and provides support services to people living with MS and their families. The board and staff are comprised of dedicated, hardworking people, and the organization funds an amazing array of options, including scholarships for children living with a parent who has MS, short-term financial support and care management for people who need help navigating complex systems.

For the last few years, Full Life Care has collaborated with the National MS Society to provide care management. Recently, we worked with them to develop our customized day programs known as MS Achievement Centers for people living in King and Snohomish counties.

Last year, they invited us to present to their board about our services and their impact on the lives of persons living with multiple sclerosis. We invited Jodie, a participant in our MS Achievement Center at our Snohomish County Adult Day Health Center, to our presentation.

Jodie is a woman in her 30s, and she arrived at the meeting with her 10-year-old son and her mother, Jennifer. They had travelled some distance to the meeting in downtown Seattle. Through our introductions Jodie smiled and nodded and did not show any overt signs of multiple sclerosis.

As the meeting progressed my staff Kristin and Patti talked about Full Life and the services we provide for people living with the disease. When Kristin introduced Jodie, it became clear that her speech and ability to communicate had been

profoundly affected by MS. Though we strained to hear her whispery, indistinct speech pattern, what stood out was Jodie's delightful personality and love for our MS Achievement Center. "It's my place to go," Jodie said. "They understand me. I don't have to be embarrassed about my speech. I have fun, lots of fun. They help me exercise and use my brain. I joke around with everyone." She leaned toward her mother affectionately and said, "I can get away from her, and she gets a break from me!" Then she laughed.

Her mother looked at her in amazement and said, "My word, I had no idea you were such a great public speaker!" With Jodie's blessing, Jennifer began to tell the rest of Jodie's story. Jodie was a young, working mother when it became apparent there was something wrong. Her cognitive functioning and ability to speak began to rapidly decline. Her family scrambled to find the cause. Finally, in her early 30s, she received the diagnosis of MS. With treatment the disease progression slowed but still continued. Jodie found herself relying increasingly on her parents and her young son, who assumed roles as her care partners. It became a constant drain for the family and a bleak existence for Jodie.

She was finally referred to our MS Achievement Center and instantly loved it. Her speech improved and she experienced joy again with the people and staff she met there. Her mother acknowledged how much it meant for Jodie to have a life outside of home and to be actively working to improve, even in the face of a very challenging condition.

Looking at Jodie in the program now, she is so busy joking with her friends and competing in the therapeutic activities, that her vibrancy shines through and overshadows her MS.

Jodie's talk for the National MS Society board and her ongoing work in our program are a model of courage and a continuing source of inspiration for our mission.

800 Jefferson Street
Suite 620
Seattle, WA 98104

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Day of Caring

In September, 45 United Way Day of Caring volunteers dedicated 120 hours to our adult day health programs. Thank you to these organizations:

- United Way Tocqueville Society Days of Caring Team
- Snohomish County Youth United
- Microsoft
- Hopelink
- Nordstrom
- R2integrated

Dear Friend of Full Life Care:

Adult day health care is a target for possible elimination in state budget negotiations. This would be a disastrous outcome for our agency and the many individuals across the state with Alzheimer's and other conditions who rely on adult day health care to remain in the community.

Please contact the legislative hotline at 1 (800) 562-6000. It is super easy and takes only a minute.

Leave a message for your legislators and the governor: "Preserve adult day health care. Hundreds of people and their families rely on this care to remain in the community and out of institutions."

Thank you so much!



Nora Gibson, MSW
Executive Director