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Caring for a friend who is seriously ill



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"I am in an advanced stage of cancer," Betty said, "and I have to start chemotherapy and radiation next week." She said it very simply and clearly, but her words hit with a heavy thud. We had become professional friends over the past couple of years. Betty is young, and her news came as a real surprise.

We talked about her cancer and her life and "how are you going to handle all this?" We wanted to help her form a plan because that's what we do, and we don't want her to travel this journey alone. Two conversations later, she agreed to allow us to organize a group of her personal friends in a Share the Care network. These friends will assist in various ways, such as transportation to appointments, picking up groceries, helping in the house ... and possibly more challenging forms of assistance depending upon the course of her treatment.

Truthfully, because we have no crystal balls, we really don't know how difficult it will be for Betty over the next months. That is why it is best to have a small network of people who are each willing to share their time and personal gifts and skills in a way that suits them best. That way, no one person becomes overwhelmed with the responsibility.

Friendship, mutual support and even love can evolve in share-the-care groups, with the potential to create something very special and beneficial for the supported friend and for the caregivers.

Today was our first organizational meeting. It was a very practical discussion, and at times it was an emotional discussion. That is the nature of things when you choose to step into a helping role with a person with a serious illness.

Our group has people from many backgrounds ... a carpenter, writer, mom, photographer, artist, waitress, scientist... and though they don't know each other, they are joined by the

common interest to help Betty, and that is exactly what we will do. They are "all in." So are we.

If you want to form a care-giving group for a friend with an illness, you don't need to reinvent the wheel. "Share the Care" is the trademarked name of an educational nonprofit with the mission of teaching people and providing tools so that friends and family members can self-organize into a caregiving group. It is an excellent small organization with a wide reach.

The book, "Share the Care: How to Organize a Group to Care for Someone Who is Seriously Ill," by Cappy Capossela and Sheila Warnock is an excellent resource.

You will find "Share the Care" at sharethecare.org. Look at the section for "Caregivers and Friends." There are downloadable organizational tools to help you get started. A group ideally should have two co-captains to lead and organize.

If home care costs or assisted living costs are beyond your budget, a Share the Care group is a very effective way to help a friend. However, care groups are not just about money... creating a caring community benefits everyone. This is where our aging Maine society is headed, not trying to tough it out alone, but joining in creative collaboration with each other, and perhaps at a later time, receiving such help ourselves.

We will conduct two community education seminars on how to start a Share the Care group in Lincoln and Sagadahoc counties after the New Year. Contact Steve to be on the notification list, if you would like to learn more.

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