

Catholic Caregivers

'Caregiving is pro-life!'

Celebrating Birthdays and Anniversaries

Birthdays and anniversaries are wonderful opportunities for fun, but your loved one may be approaching a birthday with mixed emotions.

Your dad might have a great sense of accomplishment: "In spite of all that I have been through, I have survived. I have been richly blessed." But he might also have a sense of confusion, anxiety, or even dread: "I never expected to live this long. I didn't plan to. I didn't want to. Why am I still here when my wife and so many of my friends and relatives are gone?"

What can you do to help? These are some suggestions:

--*Let your care-receiver take the lead.* Maybe this year your wife would like the extended family to gather to celebrate her turning "the big Eight-O." Or maybe she wants only a quiet lunch with you and the immediate family. Ask.

The greatest birthday gift of all might be for you to finally say out loud, "This is what you mean to me . . . This is what you mean to my children . . ."

--*Listen.* Your loved one may be feeling depressed as this emotionally charged day approaches. When he or she mutters, "I wish I had gone. It's time for me to go," don't immediately respond, "Don't say that!" This isn't a time to argue. Just tell your care-receiver why you're glad he or she is still around. The greatest birthday gift of all might be for you to finally say out loud, "This is what you mean to me . . . This is what you mean to my children . . ."

--*Think about the right gift.* It isn't always easy finding out what a loved one wants for a birthday present. Your first several inquiries may be quickly shot down with "I want to be younger" or "I want my health back." In a sense, he or she is responding honestly.

Often a good present isn't one that's bought. It may be something that gives the two of you time together. It could be arranging to go out to lunch once a month over the next year. Perhaps it's planning to come over with the kids to fix Mom's or Dad's favorite meal. It could be taking your spouse to a "First Friday" or Sunday morning Mass at the old parish. It could be arranging to have an extraordinary minister of the Eucharistic bring Holy Communion to Mom or Dad at

home if your parent isn't able to leave the house. Gifts like these can mean so much more to your loved one.

--*Plan parties with your care-receiver in mind.* A four-hour blowout or an open house with dozens of guests might simply be too much. These days, with siblings often living in different parts of the country, it might be impossible to get the family together at the same time on the same day. The solution may be several smaller celebrations on different dates. Perhaps you can help your parent place calls to your siblings who can't be there. Or consider a "conference call party."

--*Assemble a birthday book.* Family members can also put together a special "birthday book," either at the party or round-robin fashion if people can't make it to the celebration. Each person can jot down a few sentences on a particular topic; for example, "My funniest memory of Dad" or "A lesson Mom taught me that I'll never forget." Or you could arrange a "card shower," contacting relatives and friends and asking them to please send a greeting card to mark the occasion. Collect the messages and give them to your care-receiver all at once.

--*Remember the dead.* Party or not, sometimes on a birthday or anniversary it's good to pause and remember family members and close friends who have died, especially your parent's spouse. All too often the fear of saying the wrong thing or of upsetting a parent prevents an adult child from saying anything. Unfortunately, that silence can be interpreted as forgetfulness or, even worse, indifference. Keep in mind that the best birthday and anniversary celebrations often include tears as well as laughter.

Keep in mind the best birthday and anniversary celebrations often include tears as well as laughter.

--*Mark anniversaries of deaths.* Families should note anniversaries of family members' deaths, especially the death of an aging parent's spouse. You might simply spend some time talking with your parent about the person who has died. Maybe Dad just wants a quiet lunch or dinner with you. Maybe Mom would like to attend a Mass said in memory of Dad. Maybe your parent would really appreciate being taken to visit the cemetery where his or her spouse is buried. □