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## LIVING WELL: Gifts of kindness this holiday season

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By Joan F. Wright

As we experience the hustle and bustle of the holiday season, navigating crowded stores or clogged internet sites to make our holidays merry, we may want to pause to consider that for some, the holidays aren't so jolly. While we're trying to find that perfect something for that perfect someone, they might be trying to find that perfect way to just make it through the season.

Looking around our neighborhood, or across the work place, or a few rows ahead or behind us at Sunday services, might there be someone(s) who is not seeing the joy in the holidays? Consider there are approximately 43.5 million family caregivers today providing unpaid care to a loved one who is sick, disabled, or affected by a health condition. The stress that caregiving puts on individuals can be overwhelming. If just getting through a normal week of balancing caregiving responsibilities with regular life is stressful, imagine what the holidays throw into the mix for caregivers.

The holidays can be especially trying for those suffering from an illness or condition, undergoing medical treatments, or trying to reconcile a difficult diagnosis. Those who are healthy may think that the holidays can offer a "break" of sorts from the focus on one's poor health, but is that person able to see the holidays that way or take advantage of that perspective?

For some who have lost someone dear, the holidays can be particularly painful. The absence of a loved one can overshadow the spirit of the season.

If we can consider what the holidays may mean to others, the seasonal phrase "goodwill to all" can become so much more meaningful. Reaching out to family, friends, neighbors, and perhaps even strangers to offer a brighter view, some happier moments, a simple offer of help may be all they need to get closer to finding some sense of positivity during the holidays.

Gestures of kindness can benefit all. Think of the simple act of letting someone out ahead of you at an intersection or a parking lot. If the person waves, smiles or offers a sign of thanks, you drive away feeling good about what you just did. It's not anything extraordinary or grand that you did. But the feeling it creates can be.

That feel-good sensation is legitimate. Not only do acts of kindness make us feel good, they can also prompt the release of positive chemicals in our bodies. For example, the effects of kindness can cause elevated levels of dopamine in the brain, thus creating a "natural high."

Acts of the heart are good for the heart. Serotonin and oxytocin are other biochemical side effects of kindness. The hormone oxytocin plays a significant role in our cardiovascular system through the release of nitric oxide, which dilates blood vessels. This in turn reduces blood pressure. Oxytocin also has been credited with reducing inflammation in the cardiovascular system. So when oxytocin is released, it's good for the body and soul.

This season, consider offering someone an act of kindness. It may make that someone's life a bit brighter. And you'll reap a host of positive benefits as well.

*Living Well is a monthly column provided by Joan F. Wright on behalf of the NVNA & Hospice. Wright is a Certified Dementia Practitioner with NVNA and Hospice, a non-profit home healthcare and hospice agency serving over 25 communities on the South Shore from Milton to Plymouth. For information call 781-659-2342 or visit .....*

