

# 10 Life-Changing Lessons I've Learned From Family Care Partners



*Written by Laura Rice-Oeschger, LMSW, during the 10th Anniversary of the Michigan Alzheimer's Disease Center Wellness Initiative*



## **1. The people who will be there when you need support may surprise you.**

Over many years and in vastly different situations, the people who will be there for you may not be the people you assume or even hope will be. Be open to new supports, relationships, and opportunities for connections. Be ready to allow significant relationships to change.

## **2. The fears you have will likely play out much differently from what you suspect or not at all.**

Secure the training and support you need to trust yourself with decisions. Developing new skills for complex care decisions will help you trust in your future self to handle whatever arises with greater confidence. The time and energy spent will bring you additional peace of mind, so you do not miss out on the connection, joy, and resources available to you now.

## **3. Grieving is ongoing and part of wellbeing practice.**

Misunderstood as separate from living, grieving can be healthy and life affirming. Though it is painful, it is not always a solemn, dark, or isolating experience. Grieving well can be a source of transformative healing and connection. Like a clog in a drain, nothing can flow through easily when unprocessed. The more you skillfully attend to your experiences of change and loss over time (on-going basis), the more energy will be available to you.

## **4. Self-care is not a luxury, nor is it an option.**

Small habits and regular space for yourself are more impactful than intermittent, longer breaks. Culturally, self-care is often equated with pampered, self-indulgence (even delightfully so), though this is not sustaining self-care. Self-care also includes the hard things we do to keep ourselves sane and well. You will need to decide and practice what restores, protects, and enlivens your being to continue to attend to the demands and stressors of caregiving. These may not always be easy or pleasant experiences, but they will keep you healthy (boundaries, sleep, relationship quality, skill building, nutrition....)

## **5. Boundaries are not for others; they are for you.**

Protecting your energy, space and time is critical and not the same as creating walls to isolate yourself from support. The distinction is important to monitor. One is flexible and responsive; the other is rigid and defensive. This is hard work, and you may need more support to maintain and manage boundaries as the needs and demands of care partnering increase. The presence

of anger or resentment can be a good indicator of a new boundary needing to be established or the presence of unattended grief.

**6. Making the best decisions for you and your partner will likely upset someone you love.**

Someone you respect and care about may be disappointed or disagree with the way you wish to provide care and what you need, and your decisions. While it's possible for everyone to be on board, it's not often the case and it will be important to secure wise counsel from caregiving peers and professionals to tolerate frustration, disappointment, and uncomfortable feelings.

**7. As best you can, let go of how things should be and attune to how things really are.**

The difference and distance between how things actually are and how you think they should be may contain helpful information regarding any present distress and provide insight for where changes are needed. The more attention and support given to these areas of tension, the more liberated you may feel in getting your needs met. Your values and your needs are the best guide for future decisions, not ideas about how it should look.

**8. Remember your connection to the natural world.**

Accessible daily and an endless source of renewal, reflection, and refreshment. Staying connected to the cycles of nature can offer a wealth of meaning and healing. Nothing blooms all year round and everything transforms. Our wellbeing thrives in connection with the world around us and, like medicine, it needs to be included in treatment and care plans.

**9. It's OK to let go of promises made early about future decisions when they are no longer appropriate.**

Promises are different from loving commitments to provide support and protection. Significant pain can be averted when there is an understanding around the need to continually amend and adapt care plans to meet the needs of everyone involved. No one wants to break a promise and every caregiver will need to make hard decisions. It's OK and necessary to update and change agreements on an on-going basis.

**10. Caregiving may be required. Losing yourself in the care of another is optional.**

Continue to build a life for yourself outside of caregiving. While it may seem impossible many days from a timing perspective (only so many hours). It is essential to continue building and being in your own life, exploring your interests, growing and establishing relationships and activities just for you. Your happiness needs to be considered in all decisions, even and especially when it challenges your ideas of how you thought things would be. The more comfortable you are in knowing yourself, trusting yourself and being present for yourself and the person in your care, the better you will feel, especially through significant changes and stress.

