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CLIPPINGS

A Weekly Column from Iowa State University Extension and Outreach

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For Immediate Release

Powerful Tools for Caregivers: The best kind of program to teach is one where you learn something about yourself and develop friendships with the participants.

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Powerful Tools for Caregivers is a program intended to provide caregivers the powerful tools they need to care for *themselves* before they can better care for others. Caring for yourself when you feel like the weight of the world rests on your shoulders isn't an easy thing to do, but it's worth it in the long run.

This is something Powerful Tools for Caregivers participants learned when attending the program in Paullina in October and November. The class, led by Lori Hayungs, Human Sciences specialist in Family Life, and myself, hosted 9-15 folks each week who, through self-reflection and group support, became a close support system.

In week one, we introduced ourselves. Collectively, we care for a variety of individuals in our lives – spouses, parents, in-laws, children, friends, neighbors, and clients. We were all doing our best to care for those in our lives who needed us most – but we all had room to learn and grow. We chatted about the resources available to us from a local to national level. Action plans were instituted to help us make self-care a priority.

Week two brought a conversation on stress and changing negative self-talk. We discovered that the steps to managing stress include:

1) Recognize warning signs EARLY.
2) Identify sources of stress.
3) Identify what YOU can and cannot change.
4) Take action.

Admitting your stresses is a vulnerable step to take, but it's okay to admit that you need help. Which led into week three.

The third week focused on communicating feelings, needs, and concerns. It's proven that good communication prevents misunderstandings, builds relationships, increases chances of being heard, reduces stress and frustration, and enhances problem solving. The focus was on expressing our feelings without blame by utilizing "I" statements. We worked on changing statements like "You're never around to help!" to "I feel overwhelmed with the amount of time it takes to care for dad." The

group gave a lot of feedback to one another on implementing these "I" statements, which continued to bring us all closer together.

Week four dove deeper into communication, introducing two techniques including assertive communication and alignment. We did a role-playing activity and talked through using these in our own situations. As in weeks past, the group worked together to support one another in our individual struggles and situations.

Emotions came in **week five**. The group shared their most difficult feelings as caregivers and the losses they have experienced as a caregiver. We discussed that these feelings are normal, changeable, and ultimately – a tool for self-understanding. Six constructive guidelines were noted:

1) **Identify emotions.** "What am I feeling?"
2) **Accept emotions. "**This is normal."
3) **Express emotions**. Find someone to talk to. Cry it out. Exercise.
4) **Examine emotions.** "Why do I feel this way?"
5) **Respond to our emotions. "**What can I change? What do I need to let go?"
6) **Seek professional help.** A professional counselor can be an important step in managing emotions.

The final week focused on mastery. This included introducing family meetings, the power of optimism, and future goals. To close out, we shared our individual accomplishments. The over-arching themes were that we are **CAPABLE**, we are **NOT ALONE**, that we are **ALL CAREGIVERS** in our own ways, and **NO ONE'S EXPERIENCE IS LESS DESERVING** of learning tools and growing than the next.

By the end of the six weeks, I had seen into the souls of all these lovely folks, who came together to learn how to better take care of their care receivers, but left with more care for themselves and for each other. **Here were some of their responses on evaluations**:

- "Awesome ideas & user friendly"
- "I'm not alone in the things I struggle with."
- "[I'd recommend this to someone else because of] positive encouragement."
- "[The most important thing I gained is] permission to take care of myself."
- "Made good friends. Learned so much."
- "Super leaders! Made us feel important and kept things going."

The participants weren't the only ones who grew throughout the six weeks. For every positive comment they made toward the program and toward us as leaders, I have three back for each of them. This group taught me how to not be so hard on myself, to have confidence, and that no matter what comes my way, I can tackle it - **and for that, I am grateful.**

As we approach the new year, I encourage you to make a resolution for self-care. If you are a caregiver, take a night out of six weeks to join us for a Powerful Tools for Caregivers program – you won't regret it. If you're not a caregiver, look at the relaxation tools we have available at https://www.extension.iastate.edu/humansciences/ptc-tips-tools. Everyone can benefit from them!

Interested in hosting Powerful Tools for Caregivers in your community? Contact me at mldejong@iastate.edu or 712-737-4230.

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