

**Feb 21, 2013**

## **SUPPORT GROUP FOR CAREGIVERS NOURISHES FACULTY & STAFF**

By Jessica Moes, St. Olaf Class of 2014

NORTHFIELD, MINN. — Kari Berit '86 cannot expect the unexpected, but she can deal with it.

Three months ago, in conjunction with the St. Olaf Human Resources Department and through a grant from the Mardag Foundation, Berit, an expert on aging and caregiving, launched a weekly support group on campus for what she calls “unexpected caregivers.” The intent of this support group model is to be run peer-to-peer. Berit is now finally letting go of the reigns, calling upon current members to lead the program in the final developmental step of the peer-to-peer support group.

The Caregivers Support Group, which meets Thursdays at noon in the faculty lounge of Buntrock Commons, was created to provide a safe environment for those who feel like they are doing this caregiving alone and those who oftentimes find themselves frustrated and overwhelmed while providing care, typically for aging parents. Other types of caregivers may support adult children, developmentally delayed siblings or sick spouses. Berit recognizes that oftentimes these family caregivers need to care for themselves. “Family caregiving disrupts our lives,” she said. “It changes how we think, how attentive we are at work, how we make financial decision and how we feel about ourselves.”

Berit has been an active participant in the group since the beginning – with emphasis on the word “participant.” “I thought it fruitful for me to part of the group and to see how the script and the flow worked,” she said. “I started making notes all over the script and changing it. I also saw and witnessed the dynamics of the group and I could take notes and develop the model with instructions for the facilitator.” These notes have enabled Berit to create a working script for the meetings that encompasses all of the varying dynamics the support group encounters.

A group moderator – who may be any member of the group (members tend to rotate) – begins the meeting by welcoming the participants and reiterating the goals of the group. Members are each given a turn to check-in and express how they're feeling right now in relation to their caregiving without interruption or feedback until everyone has had an opportunity to share. They can also pass. Only then are members allowed to ask for feedback (if they so desire). The meetings always include discussion topics such as caregiving solutions during the holiday season or when taxes are due. The group concludes with well-wishes and short, light-hearted wrap-up. All information that is shared stays within the group, creating what Berit likes to call, "a sacred space." "Group members feel more connected with each other on a daily basis," Berit said. "They can see each other in the workplace and check-in. The nature of these meetings is not embarrassing; we're not secretive about the fact that we attend these meetings, just confidential in what we share with one another."

Scientific research conducted at the University of California – San Francisco shows that mothers caring for chronically ill children can actually damage their DNA chromosomes due to prolonged stress, affecting health and lifespans of certain cells in the body. The study found mothers who manage their stress do less damage to their chromosomes. Support groups are one of the best-documented stress-relievers. "All scientific research, including my own, indicates that human beings need support in their struggles," Berit said. "Unfortunately, there are not enough professionals in the field to care for all of the people in need, so we're looking to give people the tools to help each other."

Berit recognized the need for peer-to-peer stress-relief services, specifically in the caregiving context. A graduate of St. Olaf College in Psychology and Norwegian, Berit had spent significant time in her career post-college working in senior housing both inside and outside of Northfield. Berit was plagued with suffering caregivers who didn't realize that their small moments of stress – a mother refusing to eat meals, a father calling too often – were both common and unhealthy in excess. Through the support of the Northfield Retirement Community, Berit orchestrated a \$15,000 grant from the Mardag Foundation, a group that focuses on empowering seniors to live independently. The Northfield Retirement Community

and Berit worked together to create five self-sustaining support groups in the Northfield and Twin-Cities areas.

Immediately, Berit was in contact with Roger Loftus, St. Olaf director of human resources. Loftus had read Berit's book, "The Unexpected Caregiver," and recognized the advantages of a support group on campus. Many faculty members, including Loftus, are beginning to care for parents of the aging "baby boomer" generation. "My dad is widowed and lives by himself," Loftus said. "The group is a great way to share my concerns and fears as I encounter different issues in caring for him."

Jill Ewald, director of the Flaten Art Museum on campus, echoes the same sentiments. Her parents live in an assisted living home and her father has Parkinson's disease and dementia. She sees them a few times a week to clip their nails and take them to doctor appointments. "I feel it is a privilege to be able to do things for them, even though it takes a lot of time and emotion," she said. "The group helps me realize I am not alone."

Still a passionate participant group discussion, Berit now is speaking up less and less, allowing group members like Loftus and Ewald to care for each other. "I try to act like any other participant," Berit said. "I am a group member and caregiver, and I too am benefitting from these meetings. Eventually, however, I will not be here, and they know that. Unfortunately, there are just not enough professionals to help everyone in need, so we have to help each other. I'm hoping to give people those tools."

"Other caregivers have valuable insights," Ewald said. "They share practical information about a variety of subjects, including transportation, health care and taking care of myself. These people help me to maintain equilibrium at all times. We all share many issues and feelings. We can empathize with each other. It's a safe place to express one's self, even to cry."

The group encourages new participants to join them.



# Give yourself a gift this holiday season:

If you're caring for a spouse, aging parent, or loved one...you may need support. Join us:

**What:** Caregiver Support for the Holidays

**Where:** St. Peter's Lutheran, 418 Sumner St E (near Sibley Elementary)

**Time:** 6:30 - 7:15 p.m.

**When:** 4 Thursday eves:  
November 29; Dec 6, 13, 20

*All are welcome.* This is a safe place to share & learn helpful tips of how to juggle your role as a caregiver during the holidays. Learn how to unwind the stress and how to take care of yourself.

Questions: Call Kari Berit, MS  
612-384-8080 or

[www.UnexpectedCaregiver.com](http://www.UnexpectedCaregiver.com)

## Welcome Script

[MODERATOR READS SCRIPT AS WRITTEN. This sets the structure for the group]

Welcome to the **St. Olaf Unexpected Caregiver Support Group**. I am \_\_\_\_\_, the moderator of the group.

We start promptly at Noon and end promptly at 12:45. If you come late or have to leave early, please do so quietly.

We are a family and informal caregiver support group whose purpose is to provide a safe place for you to vent, ask questions, and seek support from people in similar situations. We provide tools and discussion topics to help you become smarter caregivers, *but our primary goal is that of emotional support*. We are not professional counselors or therapists. All family and informal caregivers are welcome.

[**READ only if there are newcomers**: If this is your first time: welcome. If you are a regular to our support group, please extend a warm greeting to newcomers. Remember, we were all new to this group at one time. Any new meeting can feel uncomfortable.]

Please know that we all come with our own emotional pain, struggles and questions. *This is a safe place. Whatever you wish to share with the group, stays with the group; that is what we all agree to in attending this Unexpected Caregiver Support group.* Some of you may wish to support each other outside the meeting time. That is totally optional and not a requirement of this meeting.

We start each meeting with a brief check in. Everyone has an opportunity to check in or pass. A check in means that you get up to 5 minutes to say where you are at **without interruption or feedback**. Not giving feedback allows the person checking in to say whatever they wish, secure in the fact that no one will judge their feelings. The person checking in has the floor and your only response is to listen and nod.

You may ask for feedback only after everyone has checked in, but we are not here to solve or fix your problems; rather, we are here to support each other. During your check in, it's helpful if you say your name, how you feel and express what, if anything, you may need.

Stress experts say that being in a support group with people who share similar issues is not only good for you, but it's necessary to our overall health. You do not have to do this alone. We are here to support you and it's okay to ask for help.

After our check in, we have a topic for discussion purposes.

[**IF THERE ARE NEW PEOPLE**] A few housekeeping details: please turn cell phones

NOT FOR DUPLICATION. This material is part of a grant pilot program is not in final form, nor is it to be shared to other groups. If there is interest from another group, please have them contact Kari Berit at kb@kariberit.com or 612-384-8080. Thank you!

off or vibrate. Please refrain from side conversations while someone is checking in or we're discussing a topic. If you have to leave early, do so quietly.

Let's begin with a check in and go around the room. Remember, this is not a time to comment or discuss, but simply to express how you're feeling at this moment. You can say you want feedback and if we have time at the end of the meeting, we will give you feedback. You can also pass.

Who would like to begin?

[END OF SCRIPT]

*Group begins check in*

*After everyone has checked in, it is time for the discussion group topic. The goal of the discussion topics is to provide further support for your caregiving journey.*

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**PLEASE NOTE:**

It's often challenging to explain the check in process of NO FEEDBACK while checking in. Think of it this way: You want to give everyone a chance to simply express how they are feeling without anyone commenting on their feelings. It's seldom that we have a chance to really be heard. After check, discussion time allows for the back and forth conversation.

Some may pass at check in. This is totally fine. Sometimes a person just wants to be present to others and feel supported without participating.

# Unexpected Caregiver Support Group

*Discussion Topic*

## Understanding the Difference Between ADLs and IADLs

When you become a family caregiver, you're entering into a field that is full of oftentimes confusing and unexplained acronyms. Let's start with two important and basic ones that you will run into after a parent or loved one has had a hospital stay, is receiving home care, or moving into senior housing: ADLs and IADLs.

ADLs are the core activities of your parent's days—the "activities of daily living." You can easily remember ADLs by thinking of your own life and your morning routine. There are five basic ADLs: In the morning you get up out of bed (transferring), you use the bathroom (toileting; this also includes bowel and bladder management if you're incontinent), you shower or clean up and wash your hair if necessary (referred to as personal hygiene, bathing, or grooming), you change out of your PJs into day clothes (dressing), make and eat breakfast (Feeding).

If you are giving care to a parent, very little in your life has prepared you to take on these responsibilities. Furthermore, your parent may resist that kind of care – especially from you.

In contrast, IADLs (or Instrumental Activities of Daily Living) are peripheral activities. These include shopping, socializing, and housework, managing medications, transportation, using technology, etc. From your point of view, they don't have to be done right this minute. From your parents' vantage point, sooner is absolutely better than later.

Caregiver Minute: ADLs vs IADLs video can be watched at <http://youtu.be/5exjfG9tiZI>

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### Suggested Questions:

Have you run into ADL and IADL talk among professionals? How did you feel when you didn't understand?

How do you feel about giving personal care to your parent or loved one? How would you feel about someone giving your such personal care?

How has your care receiver reacted to you talking about ADLs?

What experiences dealing with either ADLs or IADLs can you share with the group?