

Winter Solstice: Spiritual Care

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What is a Spiritual Winter Solstice?

A spiritual winter solstice is likened to the astronomical phenomenon of the longest night and the shortest day. Caregivers and their loved ones experience it. Caregiving relationships based in integrity and reliability reduce sinking into permanent despair and disgust especially for caregiving longer than six months to a year. Though caregiving with limitations, a well of wisdom accumulates through suffering. Western culture experiments in many ways to relieve suffering. Embracing hope, faith, and love (<https://crossroadsu.org/caring-for-the-caregiver/physical/here-and-now-for-your-loved-one-and-yourself/>) in the darkness of isolation, fatigue, and despair stabilizes caregiving focus.

Integration of spirituality vitalizes life and prepares one for death. Trust in supportive others and in a spiritual power beyond one's self anchors the soul. Both the caregiver and the care recipient rely on strength beyond what is human (<https://crossroadsu.org/caring-for-the-caregiver/spiritual/completing-the-life-cycle-soul-care/>). Hope for reliable and available support establishes the fact that a family is not alone. Courage to face short or long-term illness forges peace and perseverance.

Honesty through open communication with the family and a spiritual leader frees one from hoarding fatigue, difficult questions, dark emotions, doubts and questionable decisions. Spirituality invites releasing control of things that cannot be changed, change what is possible and the wisdom to discern the difference. Being with one another is an extension of divine presence (<https://crhcf.org/Blog/love-is-always-the-answer-what-really-matters-in-life/>) to activate forgiveness, complete unfinished business, affirm permission to die and provide comfort.

Spirituality encompasses body, mind and spirit. Belief in divinity is expressed through rituals, music, sacraments, art, meditation, prayer and worship. Counselors examine the personal search for guidance and making sense of life. The social group of a spiritual community encourages spiritual practice in relationships. Though highly subjective, spirituality energizes how caregivers and recipients interconnect to nurture each other. A goal of spirituality is to moderate the emotional, physical, and relational domains within families as they deal with illness, dying, death and loss (<https://crossroadsu.org/caring-for-a-loved-one/spiritual/what-matters-most-when-you-are-dying/>). Spiritual practice provides light on the dark nights and energy for the short days.

What are some identifiable signs that you may be going through a dark night of caregiving?

Presumption

Our lives have been interrupted, altered and rearranged. Our presumption is that life should not be this way. Questions arise: “Why our family?” “Is this permanent?” “What adjustments must be made?” We assume that life should move along in a positive manner. What a jolt when a situation must be altered. We want our freedom when we are tied to caregiving responsibility.

Expectation

Mortals are vulnerable when expectations are unmet. When reality changes, expectations must change as well. The tighter we hold on to the old ones, the more they crack into pieces. Why fight for something that is not possible? On the other hand, why not enjoy surprises rather than disappointment? Life becomes easier when we lower our expectations for our loved ones to do what they can still do for themselves. Jane Austen said, “To wish was to hope, and to hope was to expect” (*Sense and Sensibility*).

Disappointment

Continuous frustration leads to disappointment. To make mistakes is a human quality because no one knows everything. Disappointment for failed presumptions and expectations is no reason to lose hope. The ultimate goal is health of the soul (<https://crossroadsu.org/caring-for-the-caregiver/spiritual/completing-the-life-cycle-soul-care/>).

Comparison

The contrast between then and now seems impossible as physical stamina wanes. My mother said, “I’ve never seen your father so vulnerable and helpless.” We lose a little bit of our loved one each day. Living with incongruities makes us feel uncertain. “If God is so loving why does my loved one suffer?” “Because my baby died, we will never get to do all the things other parents and children do.” We long for consonance, not dissonance. We treasure equilibrium, not being off balance.

Isolation

People were made for relationships. We may be deprived of nurturing friendships through long term caregiving. We need a sense of attachment with others and with the divine presence. When the dark nights are upon us, support is of particular importance (<https://crhcf.org/Blog/The-Directors-Desk/the-meaning-of-love-keeping-it-simple/>).

Loss

Early in an illness, life stays much the same. As a loved one declines more energy is expended to complete the routine. The stability of a relationship can be sorely tested as the responsibility increases—not so much at the “I love you level,” as desire for our personal needs to be met as well. Commitment may include finding another way for the care to be done so that the caregiver can devote time to “being with” the loved one. After loss we must redefine ourselves (<https://crhcf.org/Blog/dr-ken-doka-on-grief/>).

What are some solutions to the soul’s long dark nights when the days seem too short to complete the tasks of caregiving?

Venture

In assuming the caregiving obligation we yield to a new freedom -- the freedom to give up personal rights by choosing to provide care. Other mutually agreed choices to accomplish the care (<https://crhcf.org/Blog/caregiving-during-the-holidays/>) are possible as well without guilt.

Relinquish

New meaning and purpose is achieved from a macro life to a micro life. In home care, plan for people to visit frequently at appropriate times. Use the home as a sanctuary for others to learn the art of caregiving from your family.

Satisfaction

As mortals we have this time together. There is satisfaction as we overcome the disappointment of living life as many people do—coming and going without always making plans for the care of a loved one.

Similarities

Rather than curse the darkness, we look for luminaries in dark days. There are more than enough problems; we can create solutions. Others have done this before we have and survived. A support system of friends and community services keep us centered (<https://crossroadsu.org/university-journal/caregiver-wellness-its-up-to-you/>) in what is unchanging.

Companionship

Give yourself regular breaks as a caregiver (<https://crhcf.org/Blog/caring-for-the-caregiver-understanding-the-importance-of-caregiver-well-being/>). Your faith community activity is important during the darkest days. People want to help but they don't know what to do. Explain specifically what you need and how it can be done. Many hands make the work lighter. It is good for the loved one to hear laughter as well.

Reconnect

Finding ways to reconnect with former individuals and groups is easier if we maintain some contact. Caregiving will not last forever but it can certainly seem like it will. There is a new life afterwards.

As a caregiver you will face long dark nights and short light days. Embrace them both for the duration of your choice. Face the task of caregiving with courage, its disappointments with cheer, and its trials with humility. Your example will shed light on the dark days of other caregivers.