

HEALTH

Taking care of the caregivers

New programs help loved ones deal with stress

By Cynthia McCormick
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When his wife was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease four years ago, 73-year-old West Yarmouth resident Ronald Greene spent so much energy taking care of her he almost forgot to look after his own needs.

"I suddenly became a 24-hour caregiver with no experience whatsoever," said Greene, a retired engineer.

It seemed every day was different as Linda, 76, went from being an officer of the Newcomers Club to forgetting his name, frequently refusing food and needing the help of a wheelchair.

"Every day is a grieving day," said Greene, whose wife now lives at Liberty Commons Rehabilitation and Skilled Care Center in North Chatham.

With an estimated thousands of people on the Cape suffering from diseases ranging from Alzheimer's and dementia to cancer and serious cardiac conditions, local organizations are reaching out to caregivers.

Programs starting this fall under the auspices of the Alzheimer's Family Support Center of Cape Cod and HopeHealth include

support groups and educational programs that help caregivers learn to care for themselves as well as their loved ones.

Starting Tuesday, HopeHealth will offer a six-week program at the Bourne Council on Aging aimed at helping caregivers reduce stress, relax and make difficult decisions.

Even if family members can't change the course of the disease, "we can change how we respond to the stress of the situation," said Ellen McCabe, director of professional education at HopeHealth.

She will run the free "Powerful Tools for Caregivers" program with Cecilie Brown of Elder Services of Cape Cod

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and the Islands Inc.

People taking care of family members or friends who are ill experience a spectrum of emotion including guilt, anger, depression and resentment, McCabe said.

"Studies show caregiving isn't healthy for us" and contributes to higher blood pressure and higher levels of cortisol, McCabe said.

She said the program, which she has offered four times in the past on the Cape and Islands, allows caregivers to problem-solve together and makes them feel they are not alone.

McCabe said one woman who has gone through the

program already told her she would not have survived the end stage of her loved one's illness without it.

Greene said he has gotten help from the family support center and its founders, Melanie Braverman and Molly Perdue, as well as the center's support groups.

"I've got to take care of myself," Greene said. He said he takes walks on the beach, plays bridge and reaches out to the support center when he needs to.

"Get help," Greene advised other caregivers. "It doesn't matter if it's a church or a senior center."

HopeHealth's "Powerful Tools for Caregivers" will meet from 9 to 11 a.m. Tuesdays for six weeks. To register or for more information call Beth Gilmore at 508-394-4630, ext. 450. Registration closes when the class is filled.

In addition to running support groups across the Cape, the Alzheimer's Family Support Center will hold a free educational program starting in November.

For more information about the program or support groups, call 508-896-5170 or go online to www.alzheimerscapecod.org.

— Follow Cynthia McCormick on Twitter: @Cmccormickcct.





Ronald Greene, of West Yarmouth, visits his wife, Linda, at the Liberty Commons Rehabilitation and Skilled Care Center in North Chatham. Greene says when his wife was first diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, he spent so much time caring for her he forgot to take care of himself.

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