A. HAUS KORNERSTONE

CAREGIVING

For the One Who Holds Everyone Else

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The call after the call

A HYPOTHETICAL SCENE

The doctor’s office calls while you’re putting groceries away. Your mother’s appointment has moved to Thursday morning. You write the new time on the back of a receipt and call your brother to see if he can drive. He says he’ll check. Before you put the phone down, your sister texts, “What did the doctor’s office say?”

You send her the new time. Then you set a reminder to ask your brother again tomorrow. You open the refrigerator and find the milk still in the grocery bag at your feet.

Later, someone calls and asks how your mother is doing. You tell them about the appointment. After you hang up, you realize you would have liked them to ask how you were doing, too.

When everyone calls you

My mother, Estena, was a nurse. Years later, I helped care for her as she lived with dementia. When I think of her, I remember the nurse she was and the mother I knew long before she needed my help. Even on the hardest days, she was still my mother.

You may know what it’s like to answer a question about someone you love when you’ve barely had time to sit with the answer yourself. Then there’s another call, and you tell the story again. Your family may hear from you every day and still have little idea how much of your day it takes to keep them informed.

It can feel lonely when everyone knows they can call you and you’re worn out wondering who you can call. Some days, you might want someone to take an appointment off your calendar. Other days, you might want a friend to sit with you over coffee and ask about your life. You can ask for either one.

Give someone the whole task

After my stroke, my daughter screened my calls for a month so I could rest. She took care of the calls herself. I could put the phone down because someone else had agreed to pick it up. I think about that when people ask how they can help a caregiver. When someone takes care of the whole task, you can stop keeping track of it.

If a relative offers to drive to an appointment, ask whether they can confirm the pickup time, take your loved one there and back, and let you know if the plan changes. Share the appointment details once they agree. If your loved one wants you there, someone could still handle the ride or take care of dinner that evening.

A person who lives far away can take on the family update. Ask your loved one what they're comfortable sharing. Then give the relative a short update at a time you can manage and let them handle the group message and routine replies.

If someone offers help and you have no idea what to ask for, think about the last task that interrupted something you needed to do for yourself. It might be a grocery trip that ate up your lunch hour. It might be three calls about a schedule change. Either gives you a place to start.

Words you can borrow

"Can you take Mom to her Thursday appointment and bring her home? If you can, please confirm the pickup time with her by Wednesday evening and let me know if anything changes. Can you tell me by Tuesday whether that works?"

Or, when someone asks what they can do, you might say, "Could you bring dinner on Wednesday for the next two weeks? A simple meal is fine. Please text me the day before so I know it's covered."

Give people room to say what they can do. If Wednesday is hard and Friday works, take Friday if it helps. A clear answer gives you something you can plan around.

Try handing off one thing this week

Pick a task that somebody else could do with a little information from you. You can start with one ride, one meal, or one family update.

1. **Write down what the job includes.** If it's the Thursday ride, write down the time, the address, and who will confirm pickup. Think about what usually sends the task back to you halfway through and include that in the ask.
2. **Ask one person directly.** "Could you handle _____ on _____? It would help if you could also _____. Can you let me know by _____?" Ask for a reply early enough to make another plan if you need one.
3. **Agree on when you need to hear from them.** You might say, "Please text me when you've confirmed the ride with Mom. After that, I only need to hear from you if the plan changes." If they can do it again, agree on the next date together.

Notice what you get back when someone follows through. It may be an hour in the middle of the day. It may be the relief of going to bed without setting another reminder. If you want to spend that time doing something for yourself, you can.

A closing reflection

If you've been the one people call for a long time, it can feel awkward to be the one who calls and says, "I need some help this week." You can say it plainly. You can ask while you still have enough energy to explain what would help.

And when someone asks how you're doing, you can give them a little more than the appointment update. "Mom's doing all right today. I'm tired. Would you stay on the phone with me for a few minutes?" There's room in that call for both of you.