

Season 5 | Episode #2
Care for Caregivers
Rebekah Dowhy

Crystal Keating:

Did you know there are nearly 53 million caregivers who provide support and assistance every year in the United States? Perhaps you're listening today and you're the one caring for a family member, loved one, or friend. Many of these individuals are unpaid and tirelessly helping their families around the clock.

Which is why we're so excited to have Rebecca Dowhy on the podcast today to share her own story of caring for her mother through many years of multiple sclerosis and starting a ministry called the Caregiving Support Network, whose mission is to compassionately serve family caregivers by providing them with rest from a Christian perspective.

Welcome to the podcast, Rebekah. It's so great to talk to you today.

Rebekah Dowhy:

Thank you so much, Crystal, for having me. It's such an honor to be here on the Joni and Friends podcast. And I also just wanted to take this moment to thank your listeners as well for caring so much about this issue of caregiving that they would tune in.

Crystal Keating:

Mm hmm. I agree. And I know that we are speaking to many caregivers and many families who are very thankful for their caregivers and interdependent on their family members. So I know our conversation will speak to so many who need encouragement. So maybe we could just start this conversation by talking about the Caregiving Support Network.

How did it get started and what's your vision for the network? It's such a neat ministry. I just love it.

Rebekah Dowhy:

Well, thank you so much. So I won't be able to cover just all the stories today. So, I just want to take a quick moment to let people know that if anything I'm saying piques their interest, they can go to www.caregivingsupportnetwork.org to learn more about just the stories of transformation of some of the caregivers that we're working with. But this ministry was really born out of a very personal experience for me and my family of caregiving for my mom. She had multiple sclerosis for over 20 years and was actually diagnosed the year I was born.

So from day one, I was familiar with disability in my family. So it's a very personal mission. And then when we were researching before we started this ministry with my dad and my husband and several other former caregivers, we found out that it's actually one in five Americans are unpaid family caregivers.

And that blew my mind because I knew when I was caregiving, you often feel like you're the only one in the world who's going through this scenario of watching your loved one struggle and suffer. And my family and I often felt so alone, but I knew that there were others out there going through something similar.

I would love to take this time just to say that Joni and Friends and Joni and Ken were such a huge inspiration to me during that time. You feel abandoned by God when you're going through something that is not just something temporary, but it's day after day, it's year after year with often no end in sight.

You know, you'll often hear people in the workplace say, "Oh, I can't wait for the weekend. I can't wait to relax and take some time off and then come back to work refreshed." Well, for caregivers, there is no such thing as a weekend or often even a day off or even an hour off. And so we founded the Caregiving Support Network to practically meet that need by giving them the ability to take that time off while knowing that their loved one is safe and cared for. The transformations that we've seen in the lives of caregivers already has just been so phenomenal and so rewarding.

Crystal Keating:

Oh, I bet. I mean, just that idea of like not even being able to take an hour off. That is a heavy load to carry, especially if you feel like you're carrying it by yourself.

Rebekah Dowhy:

Yes. Yes, it is. And, you know, one of our caregivers, her name is Bonnie. And when I first met her, she told me, you know, I'm, I'm at the end of my rope. I have no family. She had left her career, her job, her home behind, and moved states away to care for her brother after her parents passed. And when I met her, she had been in that situation for about 10 years. Going it alone day after day, couldn't make it out to a house of worship on a regular basis just because of the special care her brother requires. And we were able to go in, provide um, some home care, cover the cost of that, so she could take a few hours off once in a while. And it's just been so much fun to see, just the joy spark back in her life and for her to come back and say, I've never had anyone do something like this for me in the sense of they always ask how my brother is, but often they forget about me and that I'm also going through the suffering alongside them.

Crystal Keating:

Yeah, that's so true. And what a blessing to her, 'cause it's not just that, okay, now I get a few hours to go, you know, run an errand, or take a nap, or do what I need to do, which is a blessing. But someone's actually caring for you in it. Because...

Rebekah Dowhy:

Absolutely.

Crystal Keating:

It's that, hey, we're going to meet your needs, and we're going to care well for your brother. And you just see this expression of the love of Christ in it, which is incredible.

Rebekah Dowhy:

Absolutely. And on that note, just caregiving itself is such a picture of the Gospel, if you think about it. Jesus said, the son of man came not to be served, but to serve. And that is what caregivers are doing every day pouring out their lives for their loved ones. And we want to come alongside them and be that support in the darkest days of their life and say, hey, you're not alone. You have a whole community of people cheering you on and who want to come in and give you practical help and spiritual help at the same time.

Crystal Keating:

Yeah, I love that. It's so comprehensive. And Rebecca, I kind of want to go back to, you know, you mentioned that when you were born, that was essentially when your mom was diagnosed.

And so you grew up being available to your mom. So, maybe you could talk a little bit about your experience as a caregiver for your mother. I know you assisted her in every way for many, many years, so I'd love to hear more about your time with her and how your family pulled together as she lived with MS.

Rebekah Dowhy:

Yes. So like you said, my mom was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis the very year I was born. So from day one, I was familiar with what it meant to be a caregiver and have a family member living with a disability.

And I remember as young as ten and twelve already starting to help her with things around the house, help her fix her hair, uh, and that quickly progressed into more intense medical caregiving. And alongside my dad, we were her two primary caregivers all throughout my teenage years and into college. So when I say, I know this personally, you know, we have walked this out and there are moments when you're walking through this caregiving experience where you question everything. You question your faith. You question God. You question why this is happening to me. And that's where Joni and your ministry came in and encouraged my family to say, sometimes God allows what he hates to accomplish what he loves. And that phrase stuck with me as a teenager, you know, listening to these books by Joni on tape and I didn't at that point know what it is.

And I know I'm still finding that out, but I know that this ministry is a part of that. And the fact that we get to be here now and turn back and say to caregivers who are in that situation, we want to give you a hand up and we know what it's like is just really an honor for all of us and our whole team here.

But throughout caregiving, I have to say, despite the challenges, there's also so many joys associated with it. There's nothing like being there for your loved one when they're suffering and being that person to help them cross over. That's just a privilege that I'll never regret taking and being in that position.

But to any other caregivers, you know, listening to this today, I just want to say to you, you are not alone, even though you may feel like it some days when you're bandaging that bedsore or changing the bedpan. It's not a glamorous job, but I just want to say to them that they are loved, they're not forgotten, and they're certainly, certainly not alone.

Crystal Keating:

So true. And you know, you mentioned before that, I can't believe this statistic, one in five Americans are unpaid family caregivers. If my math serves me, that's 20%. That's incredible. And so what would you say is like the greatest need of a family caregiver?

Rebekah Dowhy:

That's a great question. I would say, and I think the statistics show this, and especially all the caregivers we're talking to over here, that their biggest need is simply to have a break. Um, most of them are working tirelessly to keep their loved one at home, to serve their loved one in the best way possible, but they are tired. They aren't going out socializing like you normally would be able to. They're not able to get to their church regularly. And not only that, there's a massive drain on your finances and your mental health and spiritual health all in one.

So they are pouring from an empty cup at the end of the day and our goal is to refill that cup a little bit with some time off.

Crystal Keating:

Yeah, and I think it's interesting. I've heard caregivers say, especially with the encouragement and push towards self-care. I wish there was another word for that. But you know, people say, well, you need to take care of yourself. Like you need to get away. And I've heard people say like I can't. There's no one who will step in the gap for me. What would you say to people who are experiencing that sense of like, I would love to take a break, but it's just not possible.

Rebekah Dowhy:

Mm. Well, we understand that completely. I remember as a caregiver reading articles sometimes on the internet about how to tell if you're burned out, you know, five, five questions to find out if you're burned out and, you know, of course it would be check, check, check, check. And at the end of the quiz, it would pop out a little response that said, you need to take a break, make sure and take care of yourself.

And that always frustrated me so much as a caregiver because leaving my mom wasn't an option. We didn't have the finances to bring someone like from home care in so that we could go do something. And so that the practical solution just wasn't there. At the caregiving support network, we take a very practical approach.

So we cover the costs of them taking a break, and what that looks like is usually covering the cost of home care to come in for a few hours, meal delivery, home cleaning, just those little things so that way they have time to do whatever they need to do to recharge. Sometimes that looks like them being able to get out of the house and go to their own doctor's appointment. Or sometimes, um, I know one of our caregivers, Bonnie uses the time to go pick up her brother's medication. That's an hour and a half away. And so I think something important to know is that when we say take a break, it's not necessarily I'm going to go watch a movie or get a massage, which is wonderful if they can do that, but it's often just giving them the chance to catch up on some things that are falling behind and giving them a lot of stress.

Crystal Keating:

That's good. Well, and you know in all of these things we're talking about sort of the physical ability to step away, but I can see how caregiving also is mentally and spiritually relentless. How did you and your dad, and even some of the caregivers that you're ministering to now, how do you manage that mental and spiritual depth that you feel like, man, I'm really missing this piece. I, I really need to be filled up.

Rebekah Dowhy:

Sure. And there is such a drain there as far as your mental health and your spiritual health, because you're often running on empty and you're not able to go to your friends or to your church necessarily, depending on the disability. And so we were incredibly blessed with some very wonderful friends and neighbors, and extended family who would come in and pray with us and give us that break.

And that was so, so important. So I like to say that maybe they can't get to church, but we can bring the church to them.

Crystal Keating:

Yes! Amen!

Rebekah Dowhy:

And there's nothing like being the hands and feet of Christ. I mean, that's really what he's calling us to do, is to go out to where the people are and for caregivers, that's right in their own home.

What we do here at the network is we have prayer partners who will call them on a regular basis and pour into them and pour encouragement into them. And we've had so many caregivers just tear up and say, I've just never had this kind of encouragement for me. You know, everybody wants to pray for my loved one, which is fantastic. They're so blessed by that as well, but there's just something about feeling overlooked and forgotten that we want to be that puzzle piece, um, and bring Christ right to them.

Crystal Keating:

That is so great. We always say the church is not a building, right? It's a group of people who have been called by God and so we can be anywhere, and we can be together and we can as the body of Christ go to those who are largely not included and to minister to them.

So, Rebekah, tell us a little bit more about the kinds of assistance that Caregiving Support Network does and tell us more about the Gospel-centered care. I just think that's what makes what you're doing very unique. It's not just about, again, the bodily attention. It's so much more.

Rebekah Dowhy:

Absolutely. And I know I've touched on it, but that feeling of hopelessness and feeling almost abandoned by God in those moments is the message that we're trying to counteract proactively by going in to each one of our caregivers and saying Jesus loves you. He has not forgotten about you. You are so loved and there is hope. Something about walking through those darkest times of your life with no one leads to that feeling. And so we come in with a community of volunteers, staff, donors, prayer partners who come in and all of a sudden, boom, you know, they have this entire group of people praying for them, asking how they're doing and cheering them on and saying, hey, you don't have to walk through this by yourself. We are going to link arms and walk through this with you. And so that is a massive part of what we do. We are always looking to get more churches involved because we want to bring the church to them. Um, so that's the spiritual component of things. And then we assist them practically with taking that break by covering things like home care, meals, and cleaning.

Crystal Keating:

How do you do meals?

Rebekah Dowhy:

So we partner with some sort of meal delivery company in their area, and we just cover the cost of that and take into account any sort of dietary restrictions, as often come along with certain disabilities, and that one item on their to-do list, we take that off. Just give them that extra couple hours a day to do something else.

Crystal Keating:

Oh, and what a blessing it is to get a good, hot, nourishing meal or maybe a cold nourishing meal if it's hot like it's been out here. But just that sense of like, wow, this is really good food and what a treat this is that it's been provided for us.

Rebekah Dowhy:

Yeah. And more important than that, they know that it wasn't just one friend, which is phenomenal, it wasn't just one friend who thought of them, but a huge community who is thinking about them specifically and keeping them in their prayers. There's something just so, so powerful about that community.

Crystal Keating:

Well, it is because, you know, you talk about the feeling of, I've been abandoned by God. And as much as you know, I know that's not true, but that's how I feel. I really wonder and think it's because God is Spirit and when we're not connected with people, I think we lose that aspect of seeing God because he feels people and people are the expression of his love, his care, that, that sense of like, I see you.

I'm thinking about you. I care for you. And not just that, but I'm going to actually do something to provide. God is our provider, but he provides often through people. So...

Rebekah Dowhy:

Absolutely, and there's that verse that says, "Carry one another's burdens and in this way, you'll fulfill the law of Christ." And we're such a huge fan of that verse, because it almost perfectly encapsulates the spirit of what we're trying to do, to lift and lighten their load.

Crystal Keating:

Well, you mentioned church and that's our heartbeat. And it's so important that churches play a big role in supporting caregivers. How can churches plug into the support network that you have?

Rebekah Dowhy:

Yes, so there's several ways they can get involved. I'll give the real practical way. Uh, they can go to our website, which is caregivingsupportnetwork.org and under the Get Involved tab, there's a form they can fill out with their info. And what we do when those churches come to us is we'll match them with a caregiver in their area, if possible, because again, we want to bring the church tangibly to them. And then they can choose to sponsor a caregiver, um, for a full year of support. And let me tell you, it's amazing and just a few hours of support can change someone's life. So a whole year is so transformative. It's hard to describe.

Crystal Keating:

And so I know, I know caregivers, I know what you're thinking right now. Sign me up. How do I get, how do I get this kind of care? If, if caregivers are listening today and they're saying, I need some respite. I feel disconnected from God. How do they sign up? What do they do to get help?

Rebekah Dowhy:

Yes, again, everything's on our website, caregivingsupportnetwork.org. There's a big button up at the top that says Need Help. And it's a very simple form. We try to balance our need for verification steps and taking also into account the caregiver's precious time. So we made that form as simple as possible. They'll fill it out and... We, we've been there. We know. So we'll get in touch with them right away.

I can't wait to meet some of the caregivers listening to this program. And something I want to add as well is if you are listening to this and you are not a Christian or don't have a profession of faith, that is okay. We want you to apply as well. We welcome all caregivers and we want to be a welcoming space for you. And we just want to show you the tangible love of Jesus.

Crystal Keating:

Amen. That's so great. Rebekah, I'm so glad we got to talk today and I am so thankful for what God put in your heart to do and the kind of care you're extending to caregivers. Thanks for joining us on the podcast today.

Rebekah Dowhy:

Thank you so much, Crystal, for having me.