

HEALTH & WELL-BEING

Susan Wangerman is a licensed mental health counselor who runs the Chicken Soup for Caregivers group at the Orleans Senior Center. She also does individual counseling for caregivers, makes referrals for other needed services, and supports the council's extensive program for people with early Alzheimer's and their families.



MERRILY LUNSFORD/CAPE COD TIMES

CHICKEN SOUP (really!) for CAREGIVERS

About the author

Barbara Ravage moved to Cape Cod from her native New York City in 2000, after the youngest of her children went off to college. She considers heavy doses of ocean air and Cape light the best cure for empty-nest syndrome. A graduate of Barnard College, she is the author of nine books, including a biography of Rachel Carson for middle-school students and "Burn Unit: Saving Lives After the Flames," which explores the history and science of burn treatment. She balances her writing life with yoga, karate, and pottery. After years of making do with two summer weeks on the Cape, her favorite part about living here is that she's already home.

BY BARBARA RAVAGE

Caring for a spouse or parent who is no longer able to live independently is among life's most stressful experiences. Day after day, with no happy end in sight, caregivers must put personal needs on hold and engage in intricate planning that can be shattered by a single unexpected event. It is often lonely work that takes time, patience, and ingenuity. Although most of us have a vague sense that help is available, finding out what, where, and how to get it is simply one more task that must be scheduled into days filled to the breaking point.

"Caregivers are walking a path they were never trained to walk," says Elizabeth Smith, executive director of the Orleans Council on Ag-

ing. "The resources are available, but most people don't know what they are and where to get them, so we're here as a connecting point." One of the most valuable connections occurs from 11 a.m. to 12:30 p.m., on the first and third Fridays of each month, when a group of caregivers gathers at the Orleans Senior Center. What's on the menu? Chicken soup made from scratch in the center's kitchen, a sandwich, beverage, and dessert, plus a double helping of what caregivers need most: solid, specific information from experts in every facet of caregiving, and support from others who are walking the same path.

Like all of the rich offerings of the Orleans COA, under Liz Smith's energetic and creative leadership, Chick-

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Caregivers

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en Soup for Caregivers is a response to demographic realities. According to Cape Cod Focus (www.capecod-focus.org), 35 percent of Lower Cape residents are 65 and over, with the highest concentrations in Chatham and Orleans. As the population ages, the need for services will increase.

About half of those who come to Chicken Soup are adult children with responsibility for aging parents. The other half is comprised of seniors with a spouse who requires care, at home or in a long-term care facility. What all have in common is stress. "That is the main problem for the caregiver," says the group's facilitator, Susan Wangerman, a licensed mental health counselor (LMHC) with certification in geriatrics and an oblate member of the Benedictine Order at the Community of Jesus. Stress takes both a physical and emotional toll. The effects are cumulative and insidious. Susan likens it to the frog in a pot of water, gradually coming to a boil. "You think 'I can manage this, I'll just add a few more duties,' and before you know it, you're overwhelmed. That's why we put so much emphasis on the need for respite and stress reduction."

Chicken Soup is dedicated to reducing the risk of burnout. Susan urges caregivers to be aware of these warning signs, and to get help before they reach the boiling point:

1. Extreme fatigue, lack of concentration, insomnia;
2. Depression, loss of the ability to cope with everyday things;
3. Denial about severity and outcome of the illness;
4. Misdirected anger toward others, including the patient;
5. General irritability;
6. Mood swings;
7. Withdrawal from activities and friends;
8. Lack of appetite or increased eating;
9. Expression of anxiety about the future;
10. General health problems.

The first Friday of each month is for Sharing and Caring, with caregivers talking about their own situations and lending support to others. The third Friday features speakers on a range of topics of importance to caregivers themselves and to the loved ones they are caring for. Because a major source of stress for caregivers is the

unknown – what to expect and where to turn when the unexpected happens – the program is designed to provide a wealth of information. "It's almost like taking courses in elder care," Susan says.

The COA's own outreach workers, Sue Beyle and Mary Ellen Lavenberg, offer an overview of local services. "Their minds are like Rolodexes," Susan says of these two, who are experts at identifying needs and matching them to available services. Other speakers include an attorney specializing in elder law, representatives from Alzheimer's Services, Elder Services of Cape Cod and the Islands, and from one of the area hospices; occupational and physical therapists who talk about assistive devices and home safety; and medical professionals who discuss the effects of stress on the body.

In addition to facilitating the meetings, Susan conducts two sessions expressly devoted to stress reduction. In the first, she introduces such relaxation methods as mindfulness, imagery, breathing, and other means of relieving physical tension. The second focuses on cognitive behavioral techniques. She offers both ends of the spectrum, she says, because some people respond better to one approach than the other. "People discover what works best for them." Partially funded by grants from Elder Services and the Cape Cod Foundation, Chicken Soup for Caregivers is open to all – one need not be an Orleans resident – and it costs nothing to attend, though a voluntary donation for the lunch is welcome. The program begins in October and continues throughout the year, but caregivers may start at any point and attend as many or as few sessions as they like. Those requiring structured care for their loved one while the group meets may bring them to the center's Day Program. Again, there is no charge. All that's asked is at least a day's advance notice to ensure appropriate staffing.

The list of free services at the COA is astonishingly long. Orleans residents as well as people from other Cape towns who attend Chicken Soup meetings may come for individual counseling sessions if they need more personalized attention. Having a therapist on-site works well,

not least because caregivers feel they are working with someone who sees the big picture and is familiar with the complex issues they face every day. In addition, they may tap into advisory and referral services through the outreach department. "Donations are welcome, but it doesn't matter if you have money or not," Susan says. That's thanks to grants Liz Smith has managed to obtain year after year, and funding from the Friends of the Orleans COA.

Liz has a gift for writing grants, designing programs, and finding top-notch people. "This is a wonderful place to work. Liz lets us be what we are good at," Susan says. When the grant ended for a previous caregiver support program, Liz got another one. "She came up with the idea of calling it Chicken Soup for Caregivers and

having it during the lunch hour, which was a genius idea because a lot more adult children – people who have to work – are able to come."

Although a separate, once-a-month group for Alzheimer's caregivers is among the several support groups offered at the Orleans COA, many who come for Chicken Soup have loved ones with Alzheimer's

disease (AD). "Some people in our group start out caring for the person at home, but because Alzheimer's is a progressive disease, it's usually not if but when they're going to end up in a long-term care facility." They are still caregivers, and they still need support, Susan emphasizes. "Even if the physical burden is lifted, the emotional burden remains, as does the issue of loss." The loss may be more gradual than with other diseases, and occur over a longer period of time, but it is no less real or painful to experience.

Among the hallmarks of AD are personality changes and disturbing behavior. "We try to help caregivers develop an understanding of these changes, so they can separate what is the disease from what is the person. That is very helpful in terms of reducing the stress," Susan says.

Susan has been at the Orleans COA in one capacity or another since 1995, shortly after she got her master's degree in counseling from Lesley University. She was going for

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ELIZABETH SMITH,
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

ORLEANS COUNCIL
ON AGING

Quickhits

Care for the caregiver

Chicken Soup for Caregivers
Orleans Senior Center
150 Rock Harbor Road
Orleans, MA 02653
508-255-6333
www.orleanscouncilonaging.org

Susan A. Wangerman, MA, LMHC
Candlestick Counseling Service
508-255-3866

a certificate in geriatrics at 4Cs and needed to do an internship. "I came in to talk to Liz about doing a group reminiscence therapy program for my internship. It turned out her fitness instructor had just quit, so she asked if I would fill in for a year or so. That was 14 years ago." The COA now has a varied fitness program – everything from yoga and exercise to tap dancing – and Susan has a 20-hour-a-week staff position as mental health/wellness counselor and group facilitator.

Susan was born in New York City and grew up in New Jersey and Syracuse, New York. She graduated from Vassar College, but it wasn't until 15 years after she moved to the Cape in 1981 that she got her master's degree in counseling. In addition to her work at the COA, she has a private practice, specializing in working with adult survivors of childhood trauma, recovered alcohol and drug users, and people with depression, anxiety disorders, and PTSD. Her private practice is limited to young adults and middle-aged clients, while she sees seniors at the COA only. "It's a good balance," she says.

In her first winter on the Cape, Susan recalls, it seemed like a pretty bleak place, but over the years she has come to appreciate both the natural surroundings and the people who live here. An avid gardener, she grows roses and delights in the birds drawn to her Orleans garden. A fit and active 66-year-old, she loves biking, walking, and swimming, and is devoted to Mary Jane Doonan's Tuesday afternoon tap dancing classes at the COA. Through the Community of Jesus, she has served on the advisory board of Bridge to Hope, a prison ministry of the Cape Cod Council of Churches that mentors women in the Barnstable County Correctional Facility during their transition back into the community.