

Local caregivers learn the benefits of journaling at a workshop Monday

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Journaling can be a healthy and powerful form of self-expression. That's what local caregivers learned Monday afternoon at Ashland Public Library.

Whether in a personal or professional facet, caregivers can use journaling to de-stress, gain perspective and more.

Sponsored by the Mental Health and Recovery Board and Older Adult Behavioral Health Coalition of Ashland County, three caregivers and counselors led a workshop on how personal and professional caregivers can effectively use journaling along their journeys.

"Caregiving can be quite meaningful, rewarding, even a joy, but it can also be quite challenging," said Diana Spore, member of the Mental Health and Recovery Board.

As a caregiver for her 89-year-old mother, she uses journaling for everything from making lists and bulleted notes to share with the doctor to her thoughts and feelings of the day.

"Journaling provides you an option for writing down what you're hearing from others, what you're thinking and feeling, to vent about what you're going through," Spore said. "And thinking through 'have I done the best that I can, could I have done anything differently?' And to consider how to draw boundaries with other family members so that relationships continue to grow and thrive, be healthy, rather than becoming toxic."

Judy McLaughlin, who has a background as a mental health professional and educator, shared about her personal journey caregiving for her mother during the last years of her life.

Working with her siblings on best practices for her mother, she found journaling and creative writing as a way to facilitate personal care and keep track of everything that happened.

"It's a very practical way of using a creative expression," McLaughlin said.

Counselor and author JoAnn Shade shared how journaling can be a form of free expression compared to writing for a newspaper or a paper for school.

"What I really like about journaling is there aren't any rules ... we can write freely and we can keep writing," Shade said. "We can write honestly."

The three shared journal entries can vary in forms of writing prompts and recording events of the day. Writers can make lists such as gratitude lists, a reward list for once something is accomplished or a "stop doing" list, like "stop judging yourself."

Other forms of writing include writing letters, regardless of whether they are sent to the addressee; writing essays, such as a letter to the editor; jotting down your story of the day in six words; or writing poetry.

"You can write whatever you think and feel," Spore said. "It's very self empowering, which is very important when caregivers may feel that so much is out of their control. You don't have to worry about what someone else might think or feel, that they might think badly of you. You don't have to explain."

When journaling, it's also important to think about what brings you joy and to find joy in each day as a way to uplift and get through the journey, the three shared.

Participants learned to think long-term with what they plan to use their journals for when the caregiving period is over. They also were reminded to set privacy rules with family, whether hiding journals away or specifically telling others not to read entries. And, last, they learned to date each entry.

The workshop included a few writing prompts to give caregivers an idea for how to facilitate their own journals.

Participants wrote about what they would do if they had a day to themselves, a particular stressful caregiving experience and a fill in the blank to "when do I get to "

The three speakers provided a packet of information to help get them started, including Shade and McLaughlin's book "Creative Expressions for Caregivers."

Workshop-goers appreciated the event, finding several good takeaways.

Ashland resident Stephanie Todd, a past personal caregiver and member on the Mental Health and Recovery Board, enjoyed hearing personal stories from the speakers and others in the room.

"It lets you know you're not alone," Todd said. "And I also took away the different types of journaling to help you in your caregiving and to help you de-stress."

Mary Bright, an Ashland resident and personal caregiver, said she wanted to start getting in the habit of writing things down, specially during the difficult days.

"Maybe once after it's out of my mind and written down I won't dwell on it anymore, you know," Bright said.

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