

8 Rules for Writing a Holiday Letter While Caregiving

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The holiday letter has traditionally been a way of letting extended family and friends know what's going on in your life and the lives of your immediate family. While not everyone decides to send a December dispatch, many people do, particularly when an elderly loved one is involved.

The key to a well-written holiday letter is maintaining a delicate dance between truth and embellishment, reality and aspiration. Achieving this balance is a tricky task regardless of your circumstances, but it becomes even more difficult if you're a family caregiver.

How do you tell friends and family about Mom's declining health? Do you have to feign optimism for the sake of appearing calm and in control? What do you say to those who you feel have abandoned you and your loved one since you began caregiving? If you are compelled to write a holiday letter to friends and family this year, keep the following pointers in mind.

Make Your Own Rules This Holiday Season

Your first step is to stop, take a deep breath and decide whether you really want to write a holiday letter. Even if your yearly missive has been a fixture of past family festivities, you shouldn't feel pressured to keep doing it just because it's a tradition.

"The holidays are a great time to stop and reflect on life," says Cindy Laverty, former family caregiver and caregiving coach. "The year I chose not to get caught up in all the hype, everything changed for me. I began making my own rules."

As a caregiver, you have enough on your plate already. Tweaking your holiday responsibilities so you can actually enjoy this time of year is not just understandable, it's often necessary. If you decide to go through with this plan, make sure you're writing your letter for the right reasons. In other words, you're doing so to update family and friends, reminisce about the events of the past year, and re-connect with people you may have fallen out of touch with. Letters that arrive with a wholly negative spin, even though they may be honest and heartfelt, are not likely to be received well or reciprocated.

Decide What Story You Want to Tell

Before putting pen to paper (or fingers to keyboard), Laverty says you should ask yourself one question: "What would I write about my life and caregiving if this was the last holiday I spent with my loved one?"

Use this question as a starting point to determine the purpose and tone of your letter. It also helps to brainstorm some of the year's highlights or events that you want to mention in your letter before you begin writing.

Do's and Don'ts for Holiday Letters

Laverty offers the following suggestions for how to appropriately address sensitive caregiving topics in a holiday letter.

- ***Do: Discuss your caregiving responsibilities.***

While it's important to realize that you are much more than just a caregiver, it's equally as important to acknowledge the valuable role you play in managing your loved one's health and seeing to their well-being. As long as you feel comfortable talking about the caregiving aspects of your life, don't hesitate to include them in your letter.

- ***Don t: Engage in a gripe session.***

According to Laverty, it's essential to avoid using a holiday letter to lash out at those who may have been less than supportive of your efforts as a caregiver.

"This is not the time to try and make people feel guilty for not being there for you," she points out. However, this doesn't mean you have to make caregiving sound like a breeze. Just be honest and keep things light. Laverty offers the following example of how to tackle this tricky subject:

"As many of you know, I've been my mom's caregiver for the past year, and it hasn't been easy. The good news is that I've learned a lot about Mom and about myself. Truthfully, some days are easy, others are more difficult, and some days I'd rather forget. If you ever become a family caregiver, I'd be happy to share some of the tips and tricks I've discovered along this journey."

- ***Do: Talk about how your loved one is doing.***

Friends and family—especially those who don't communicate with you very often—will (hopefully) appreciate being updated on how your care recipient is faring. Is Mom attending a new adult day care center that she enjoys? Has Dad made some progress in his rehabilitation since his stroke? Share the milestones and little victories that you and your loved one have had over the past year.

- ***Don t: Overshare.***

Toeing the line between being honest and bogging down your readers with unnecessary details can be challenging. Because you are the one on the front lines, it can be hard to take a step back and figure out what to share and what to leave out. Laverty suggests keeping things simple. Share a few updates from the past year, mention something that you and your loved one are looking forward to over the holidays or in the new year, and emphasize that it would be nice to reconnect via phone or in person. If you want to give family and close friends an easy-to-understand update on your loved one's overall condition (e.g., mood, memory, eating, sleeping, finances, etc.), you may want to consider filling out a care report and sending it along with your letter.

- ***Do: Send your letter to family and friends.***

After you've drafted your letter, you may be stumped when it comes to putting together your mailing list. The best way to determine whom to send your holiday letter to is to ask yourself one simple question: Would you enjoy reading a holiday letter from this person? If the answer is yes, then they'd probably be a good addition to your list.

- ***Don t: Include everyone.***

When it comes to holiday updates, close friends and family members should make up the bulk of your audience. If you really want to send a gesture to let someone know you're thinking of them this season, but sharing your full update seems like overkill, just opt for a themed or blank card with a short greeting inside.

- ***Do: Reach out.***

One great thing about sending out a holiday letter is that it can help you reconnect with people you may have fallen out of touch with. If you use a one-letter-fits-all approach, Laverty suggests including a short personal note for certain people saying that you'd like to talk on the phone sometime or catch up over a cup of coffee. This can also provide you with the perfect entrée to casually [ask for help](#) or support.

- ***Don t: Assign blame.***

While it may be tempting to do so, a holiday letter is not the appropriate place to vent. If

it helps, you may want to join an [online caregiver forum](#) or local caregiver support group to de-stress before sitting down to write your letter. As Lavery says, "If there is bad blood between family members, a holiday letter is not the place to express these feelings."

Do you write holiday letters to friends and family each year? Has caregiving changed the way you think about this tradition? What are your tips for composing a short and sweet update?

From Del: At the bottom of most of the articles I send, there are related links. By clicking on the links, you can open them and check them out for yourself. In the past I have opened and copied a few of them if they connected with the focus of that email. With this article, I checked out the first and third. I found them worthwhile, but I do not want to over load you. I suggest that you click on these yourself if they grab your interest. Also, if you ever find an article you feel must be shared, please do. If you don't want your email displayed send it to me, or send by Bcc to others. If you ever have any problems with links from my emails, please let me know. Thank you.

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