Introduction

If you’re reading this book, it’s because you know someone who has Alzheimer’s disease or another form of dementia. As a physician who has devoted my life to the care of seriously ill people and as a former Alzheimer’s caregiver, I know firsthand the cruelty of this disease. Insidious and unrelenting, it throws so much of how we look at life into question, including what defines us as human beings, what’s most important in life, the meaning of love, and much more.

Being involved with Alzheimer’s can be frightening and challenging as you helplessly watch someone you love suffer from the vicious indignity of gradually losing all that made them who they were. The experience is unlike anything else you’ve gone through and, at times, you might feel as if you’re losing your mind. You’re in the midst of a terrible plight that is, unfortunately, often unimaginable to others who have not walked in your shoes. And with everyone’s focus on the person with Alzheimer’s, you’re expected to put your life on hold. Yet your life continues to unfold, along with all of its own demands and challenges.

In addition to the physical, financial, and logistical problems you may be facing right now, comes the emotional obstacle course you must traverse. As you survey your circumstances, you may be aware of a tendency to feel guilty or judge yourself harshly. Struggling against a backdrop of isolation, the typical lack of validation for thoughts and feelings that arise, the fatigue and unpredictability of day-to-day caregiving, and the stressors in your own personal life, you may find yourself thinking that you could be doing more or doing a better job. Regardless of how hard you toil, there is a natural tendency to find yourself wanting. Unfortunately, this focus on the negative can prevent you from tapping into your strengths or being fully aware of your basic goodness and abilities, not to mention all that you’re indeed accomplishing. It can also blind you to other, more positive perspectives.

I wrote Mindfulness Support for Alzheimer’s Caregivers because throughout my 25 years as a physician I’ve been drawn to “wounded healers” and have devoted myself to helping heal them. It’s what I also do in my role as a life coach for physicians, guiding them toward greater fulfillment in their lives, which, in turn, makes them better healers. You, the caregiver, whether living near or afar, are also a healer, and it’s important that you’re as healthy as possible—physically and emotionally. Not only so that you can provide good-quality care for your loved one, but to also ensure that you live through this experience in a way that preserves your own well-being and the well-being of other people in your life. Based on my insights as both a physician and a life coach, the collection of affirmations, tips, and exercises in this book will provide you with the structure, guidance, and support to accomplish these two critical goals.

Mindfulness Support for Alzheimer’s Caregivers will shine a light on your life and help you understand that all the emotions, thoughts, and reactions you’re experiencing—without exception—are normal. Through effective coaching and positive psychology techniques, you’ll learn that you’re fine just as you are and that there’s nothing wrong with what you’re thinking or feeling. You’ll gain the skills you need to intercept, question, and dispel negative internalized messages, shift your focus back to your strengths and accomplishments, and increase your comfort with the range of emotions you’ll encounter. You’ll also be open to new perspectives and possibilities, where you might once have felt stuck.
In addition, *Mindfulness Support for Alzheimer’s Caregivers* will show you how to apply the powerful tool of “mindfulness” toward managing your life. We spend so much time doing things that most of us don’t know how to simply be. By stopping to pay full attention to and appreciate the moment you’re experiencing right now—the only moment you can truly be sure of—you can be more present during challenging times. You will find that the circumstances, no matter how challenging, are actually more manageable than you imagined.

Above all to remember is that with Alzheimer’s disease there’s so much you can’t control. The tools in this book help you see that the one thing you have control over is your own mind. You have more choices than you realize, and you can learn how to adjust the lens through which you look at yourself, your life, and the world around you. Although your circumstances might not change, your ability to control your experience of them can. By becoming more discerning about your internal thoughts and feelings, you will view others and, of equal importance, yourself, with more compassion.

*Mindfulness Support for Alzheimer’s Caregivers* offers 52 weekly readings that can be approached in whatever order works best for you. Some readings touch on medical and practical issues, while others address psychological matters. All provide affirmation and validation of your experience. Each entry is followed by an exercise that encourages you to expand your ability to be present and to treat yourself with greater acceptance and kindness. It might include a question to ponder, a self-reflective writing assignment, a suggestion for taking an alternative action, a small task for you to complete, or encouragement to establish a nurturing ritual. By working on these exercises, you’ll cultivate new patterns of being that will help you focus on all the good things you’re doing. To keep track of your progress, I strongly encourage you to keep a journal.

At first glance, you might wonder how you’ll have the energy to add anything more to your current to-do list. However, by following these weekly affirmations and exercises, you’ll be taking the time to care for yourself and you’ll grow and learn in the process. It’s worth setting aside a few minutes each day to cultivate new patterns that can decrease your stress. Changing your existing patterns will require practice, so try to review and repeat the exercises every single day of each week if you can.

Alzheimer’s brings with it so much pain and suffering, I hope that this book nourishes your spirit and supports you as you move from survival to growth throughout this difficult period of your life.

**Affirmations**

**Say It Isn’t So!**

There’s always a period when you know that your loved one is slipping away, but you just can’t accept that they have Alzheimer’s disease. It could be that they’re just getting old. Maybe it’s memory loss—isn’t that normal as people age? Perhaps they’re depressed. Maybe that time when they couldn’t tell the difference between the brake and gas pedals was due to stress. You find
yourself going back and forth in your mind: Maybe it is, maybe it isn’t. It’s just so scary to believe that the true reason behind all of the changes is Alzheimer’s disease.

Many of us would rather not acknowledge that a loved one has Alzheimer’s, and it’s human nature to have this hope. We want things to go on as they did in the past. The truth may be too painful to face; but by recognizing what you’re dealing with, you’ll be in a stronger position to cope. You’re already spending time worrying about how your loved one is doing, but now you can focus your efforts more effectively, including on making arrangements to ensure that they’re safe. As painful as the reality is, once you accept it, you will be better able to manage their life, and you’ll be more successful in managing your own.

Be present
This week, spend 30 minutes reflecting on and writing down your thoughts about the following questions: What’s the downside of not believing my own reality? What would I do differently if I accepted the truth that my loved one has Alzheimer’s?