

Deb Karpek:

Hello, everyone! Today it is my pleasure to introduce Deborah Strafuss to our Summit listeners.

Hi, Deborah!

Deborah Lynn Strafuss:

Hi!

Deb Karpek:

Welcome!

Deborah Lynn Strafuss:

Thank you! It's a pleasure to be here, Deb!

Deb Karpek:

It's a pleasure to have you here! Thank you! Deborah's topic today is *Reiki for Alzheimer's and Caregivers*.

After learning Reiki to assist her mother through the end stages of Alzheimer's disease, Deborah transitioned out of a full-time business career to fulfill her personal mission of bringing Reiki to the public as a wellness and self-healing practice. She is an advocate of personal wellness as a life goal, Reiki as a sustainable income generating healing practice and Reiki as a recognized and accepted integrative practice within the medical community. As Executive Director of the Celebration of Reiki, Inc., Deborah continues to support education for Reiki Practitioners and Reiki outreach in local communities. Deborah is the author of "On Angels' Wings: A Journey Through Alzheimer's with My Mother", has written and published numerous poems and articles online through her websites, is an Alzheimer's Advocate and Ambassador with the Alzheimer's Association of Massachusetts and New Hampshire and a Community Educator via her caregiver conversations book presentations.

So, Deborah, let's talk about Reiki for Alzheimer's and Caregivers. Why is Alzheimer's of such importance in your life and how did you become involved in providing Reiki for Alzheimer's and Caregivers?

Deborah Lynn Strafuss:

Alzheimer's is not a disease of choice, so you have no choice when something like this comes to you, it simply comes into your life. Alzheimer's runs in my family and I traced it back to at least one generation before my grandmother. My grandmother passed from it back in the eighty's, my mother and her older sister have both passed from Alzheimer's and my two younger aunts are in mid-stage and early stage. It runs in the family. Not only that, I have four daughters, like my grandmother, and so there's a sort of a spiritual connection with my grandmother that runs through me and around us.

And as stated earlier, I actually learned Reiki... I had no idea what it was... I learned it for mom. When she entered the later stages of her disease and had to be in care, it really became my go-to tool for her; it was the best, most wonderful thing I could bring her. I never had empty hands when I went to visit mom. There's not much you can control in Alzheimer's; it's a disease of huge losses. Being able to have Reiki hands was a real gift!

Deb Karpek:

I love that! So, you really do have a very personal connection to this and I love that saying: "I never had empty hands!"

Deborah Lynn Strafuss:



Right!

Deb Karpek:

That's so beautiful! Can you get a brief description of the disease from those who may not be familiar with it?

Deborah Lynn Strafuss:

I certainly can. I'm going read an excerpt from my book, a quote by Dr. Raia who is the former Clinical Consultant to the Alzheimer's Association for Massachusetts and New Hampshire, and I'm going to talk to you about the disease. According to Dr. Raia, "Alzheimer's disease is a progressive, debilitating brain disease resulting in death. Up to two-thirds of the brain is physically gone by the time of death."

There is a really frightening look at what Alzheimer's is. We want to say it's a lot of other things but it's not; it's a disease of the brain and it literally destroys the brain tissue. It is currently the sixth most lethal disease in the world and the only one of our top ten killer (diseases) that has no cure, no reversal, and no slowing. There are some current studies underway involving lifestyle changes that can possibly result in some improved function and memory, possibly aide in prevention or delay offset, but everything is pretty much unproven as yet.

We have one drug that might help remove some of the protein tangles and plaques in the brain, but this is all very new research in baby stages, it is years away! So, it's a frightening disease that slowly robs the person of all their capacities and abilities. Visiting and working with them in care communities you see the emotional devastation they themselves are suffering; they are aware of their loss in both early and mid-stages of the disease and they know how helpless they have become and how much they can't live the lives that they used to live. By mid-stage, most of them are very sad people. There's a lot of anger and depression among those in care and they're very frustrated at home by the confusion and the malfunctioning of an organ we have all come to rely on it so heavily, our brains...

Deb Karpek:



Very true, very true! That is scary. So, you mentioned the stages and I understand there are three formalized stages: early, mid and late. Can you talk to our listeners about the benefits of Reiki and how it can help those with this disease in each of these stages?

Deborah Lynn Strafuss:

Yes. As I just mentioned, in that early stage of Alzheimer's, people are still very high functioning. As a matter of fact, as I explained in my book, we didn't even know mom had it. We just thought there were things that didn't make sense; she had a lot of postit notes all over the house, we had no clue! But it can be a time of great fear and frustration as the person affected struggles to maintain as much of their normal functioning as possible. Mom was really struggling behind this façade she had. Alzheimer's people are increasingly aware of how their brain is sometimes just not performing for them - they know they're "losing it."

Family and partners or children, whoever is involved, are around at this stage you know, and especially if they are smart enough – what I urge all people to do is go get tested to find out because there are differences between normal memory loss and Alzheimer's, so find out – but if there's a diagnosis, then this becomes another huge piece with the family and caretakers here because they're facing up to the disease, they have to make legal and financial arrangements and they are consciously learning to let go of parts of a relationship that they will never have again. So, there's a lot of loss and sorrow there. Reiki assists with these heavy emotions of grief, calming the mind and calming the emotions of both the caregiver and the loved ones so that clearer decisions can be made more calmly at this very important stage, and so that they can also continue to enjoy the best parts of the relationship that they have. If you're not loaded with fear and grief and loss, you can enjoy one another and enjoy the time that you have, and that is the precious part of this early stage.

So mid-stage: There's a lot of agitation, lack of sleep, possible wandering, increased loss of capacity; vision, hearing, and movement may all be affected progressively; there's the issue of driving, which has to go away, and there's something known as sundowning, which is a later-in-the-day agitation caused by the loss of the light which somehow affects the brain. And again, agitation, anger, irritation - a lot of times



psychotropic drugs are prescribed in this stage – they are not good for people, but they are the only recourse (medical treatment) we have – so once again Reiki is a calming tool, it aids in depression, anxiety, it can help with the sleep problems for the person affected and it can greatly assist the caregiver with caregiver burnout and stress because this is probably the most pressured time of the disease. At this point, there are lots of adjustments, unforeseen developments, and the stress is non-stop. There is no letup. Loved ones wake up, may be roaming around in the middle of the night; you are on 24/7, so really helping with the caregiver burnout - it's really important!

Late stage is moving to the place where your loved one can no longer communicate with you. Reiki can bring relief from ills and concerns that are no longer able to be expressed by your loved one, either verbally or physically. Activities of daily living are pretty much gone, they can't dress and feed themselves. The brain can't communicate with the body enough for them to be able to give us information, and this is where I found Reiki really helpful! So, through deep relaxation, Reiki brings relief, often smiles and peacefulness to late-stage recipients and calmness to caregivers. It's a great tool for these unmanageable outbursts and griefs and challenges from this late stage.

Deb Karpek:

Thank you. Yeah, Reiki is such an excellent tool for so many things but especially for those, and I never really thought about it in terms of Alzheimer's and for both the patient and the caregiver. Besides Reiki, are there any special qualifications a practitioner should seek to work with those with Alzheimer's?

Deborah Lynn Strafuss:

Yes, definitely! Because if you're interested in working with those affected by Alzheimer's or any other dementias there are – and there are a few of them – you need to learn about the disease, become familiar with how to interact with someone at each stage, especially in Alzheimer's, learn how to read the signs of engagement and become a gentle safe haven for them as you provide Reiki. There are dementia training programs out there and certifications available. I would really urge someone to move



in that direction. I would suggest becoming Dementia Certified; I'm Dementia Certified, but here's what I have found: these programs are actually more tailored to those who are already working in healthcare facilities, rather than the one-on-one approach of providing Reiki. So, I've prepared a document about some of my own findings on this and I'm actually going to be working with an organization to try and help develop training for Reiki practitioners; I don't know if that will happen but I will certainly let you know if it does.

Deb Karpek:

That's a great idea!

Deborah Lynn Strafuss:

Yes. So, I wanted to just kind of tailor that. I'm going to give you some of my learnings and the ways that I would tailor this kind of dementia training specifically for Reiki practice. At the end of the program, you'll be able to access that.

Deb Karpek:

Good. Thank you very much! And you know, just like with any disease, you want to know as much as you can about it to help the person that you're caring for and to help yourself, you know? And knowledge is power, and then you combine that with Reiki and it's really very, very effective!

You had mentioned the caregiver burnout and how Reiki really, really does help with that. Are there other ways that Reiki can help the caregiver?

Deborah Lynn Strafuss:

Yes, a surprising one that I didn't realize for a long time. So when mom completed her journey, and after four years of bringing her Reiki every week, I looked back and realized that the Reiki had calmed me as much as it had her. I was kind of healed of the emotional devastation of caring for her, losing her, while I was in the process of bringing her comfort and a peaceful passing - but here's the deal! Reiki not only helps with the active stages of caregiving as I mentioned earlier, but it puts the caregiver on firmer ground for recovery from caregiving after a loved one is gone. An important



fact here! Caregivers are themselves one of the highest risk categories for depression, substance abuse and mental and physical illness after caregiving.

Reiki can really support and strengthen your recovery as a caregiver, and what I call your restatement of life, because no one is the same after caregiving! It is a life changing experience and that, in itself, aside from the physical debilitation and the emotional stress and strain, is a huge challenge! So, Reiki really helps the caregiver recover.

Deb Karpek:

I love that! Thank you so much! And you know, you can give yourself Reiki daily as you're giving it to the person that you're caring for also; not only go and lie down on somebody else's table but we have our hands at our disposal 24/7, so that's what's so beautiful about it! And I mean I love lying on tables but it's really nice to be able to just put my hands on myself and give myself Reiki when I need to.

Deborah Lynn Strafuss:

Exactly!

Deb Karpek:

It's so miraculous! Thank you.

Deborah Lynn Strafuss:

Also, when you give Reiki you are, as you're channeling that beautiful flow, receiving it just through the process, so it becomes actually almost a bonding experience.

Deb Karpek:

Oh, absolutely! You know, it's such an intimate thing when you're giving Reiki and I can't imagine that not bonding. I mean it just feels so good and you feel so connected to the person that you're giving Reiki to.

Deborah Lynn Strafuss:

Yes.

Deb Karpek:



So one of the most important things about wellness is preventing disease. Preventing Alzheimer's is a crucial part of a healthful life journey as there is currently no treatment or cure. Can you speak about Reiki as part of a preventative lifestyle?

Deborah Lynn Strafuss:

Oh, yes. I'm not only speaking about it but I'm using it. I mean I, myself, I'm at a high risk for the disease, so the practice of self-Reiki and self-care are of great importance to me personally as we just mentioned. And as I talked about earlier, researchers are beginning to find that certain healthy lifestyle changes can make a difference in the progression of, and possibly delay, the onset of Alzheimer's - and I am all for that, I tell you! So this (self-Reiki), is something (preventive) we can do with a disease that is really known for taking away self-determination and self-control; we're sort of helpless here, there is no cure yet, but we can do what we can do to prevent it, and Reiki is a powerful tool for prevention.

The first place of attack in Alzheimer's disease is the region of the hippocampus, which is found in the lower back region of the brain. It is the storage center, the memory center. Now, meditation has been found to actually increase the size of the hippocampus and also aide in the daily flushing of the brain as it sort of dumps its cache memory at the end of the day when we sleep - the brain kind of clears itself. Meditation helps that! Using Reiki greatly facilitates the process of meditation and aids in restful sleep. Many times, when I'm giving myself self-Reiki and I put my hands on my head, I can literally sense the tension I didn't even know was there.

Deb Karpek:

It's true!

Deborah Lynn Strafuss:

Yeah, we don't even know it!

... and it leaves you in a calmer, wider, more present state. This calmer, more present state was also often mom's response to receiving the Reiki when I gave it to her. Of course, there are no studies being done and no research models to consult, so self-care



through Reiki remains a personal choice and experience, but to me, when we talk about a healthy lifestyle, that means incorporating not only Reiki but responsible selfcare in all areas of life: physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually. Reiki is not a magic button you can use in place of healthy eating, exercise and sleep, and it often leads us on a path of emotional self-healing that we have the choice to respond positively to or walk away from. All these choices are part of becoming healthy and well in mind, body and spirit, so let Reiki guide you in making wise choices.

Deb Karpek:

And it really does because I think about my journey and watching the journey of those of my students, the more we welcome Reiki into our life, whether we're giving it to ourselves for practicing or teaching, the more our lifestyle does evolve to be a healthier one, and the more we let go of those things that are not good for us, whether they are food, emotions, people, jobs, whatever; I mean that's certainly been my experience and yeah, such a good tool for, like you said, healing on all levels: mentally, physically, spiritually, and emotionally.

Deborah Lynn Strafuss:

Definitely! And it's important to remember that all of these are choices, that Reiki is very polite, it will never make you healthy if you don't want to go there, so our involvement and our choice and our active participation is essential in living a healthy life with the help of Reiki.

Deb Karpek:

Absolutely! I wholeheartedly agree. So before we wrap up, do you have any last thoughts?

Deborah Lynn Strafuss:

Yes, so I just wanted to make a little comment about my book. If you are someone who is in the midst of a journey with Alzheimer's, or beginning a journey, you might want to move towards my book mentioned earlier, which is "On Angel's Wings: A Journey to Alzheimer's with My Mother". This is what I call a hybrid, kind of cathartic, work



of poetry and prose, and it is a very helpful and beautifully expressive version of a caregiver's journey, all of the ups and downs, and ins and outs that we faced and dealt with. So I really urge you if you are in that place, go and check out the book on my site.

Deb Karpek:

And that can be found on the <u>www.On-Angels-Wings.net</u> website, correct?

Deborah Lynn Strafuss:

Yes, on <u>www.On-Angels-Wings.net</u>.

Deb Karpek:

OK. And another offer that she has for us is a PDF which will be linked on her Summit page here and on her website for Reiki and caregivers, "knowing the signs". Do you want to speak a little bit about that?

Deborah Lynn Strafuss:

Yes, I will. I'll briefly put together some of the signs of Alzheimer's but I'm actually also going to offer you a little bit more in-depth work with some of the techniques that I have learned in working one-on-one with people in various stages of Alzheimer's.

A lot of times you're not going to find that as much in dementia training. As I say, it's a little more institutionalized. So, I will have that for you. It's very important to know the science; we talked about that: just because you forget where you hang your keys does not mean you're getting Alzheimer's. So, you need to really be aware of the differences and how you interact on a one-to-one basis with someone if you're trying to approach them for the purpose of Reiki.

Deb Karpek:

So, this is the more specialized training that you were speaking to earlier in the interview?

Deborah Lynn Strafuss:



Yes. You know, I'm not going to call it training; I'm just going to call it sharing what I've learned with you; it will be beneficial.

Deb Karpek:

Perfect. Thank you!

So, to reach Deborah, she has a couple of different websites: the first one is <u>www.CrystalReikiEnergy.com</u> and then again that website for her book, <u>www.On-Angels-Wings.net</u>.

So, thank you, Deborah! This was an interesting and very informative interview and I appreciate you so much taking time to educate us about this very important topic.

Deborah Lynn Strafuss:

Thank you so much for having me. I am totally dedicated to getting this information out, so I am very grateful for the opportunity to share!

Deb Karpek:

Great! Thank you so much! Reiki blessings to you!

Deborah Lynn Strafuss:

You as well!

