



Movie and TV star **Lea** home first, in honor of the grandmothers and taught

Lea Thompson's life is one big juggling act. Besides starring in the ABC Family series *Switched at Birth*, the veteran actress had roles in five films last year, including *J. Edgar* with Leonardo DiCaprio. And that's on top of her roles as wife of director Howard Deutch (they've been married for 22 years) and mother of daughters Madeline and Zoey. Lea, 50, doesn't let it rattle her though. Her skills as an actress—she moves easily between drama and comedy—come in handy when life throws a curveball. And one of the most heartbreaking ones came just as she was hitting star status in the '80s megahit *Back to the Future*. While playing her comedic role

Why Alzheimer's is

Thompson puts hearth and disease that took both of her her the secrets to serenity.



Lea with her grandmothers, who both had Alzheimer's.



as Michael J. Fox's mother by day, off the set she was helping her own family come to terms with the devastating news that both her grandmothers had Alzheimer's disease. Sadly, the script didn't end there.

"My stepfather and father-in-law also had Alzheimer's, so unfortunately, I have quite a lot of experience with the disease," confides Lea.

And rather than losing herself in the world of Hollywood, Lea stayed strong for her family by taking refuge where she feels best: with them. Here, she shares the wisdom that helped her weather the storm with acceptance and grace.

Talk it out. "Years ago, when my grandmothers had Alzheimer's, there was little acceptance of the disease. Thankfully, today there's much more community support for caregivers," says Lea, who does fund-raisers for Alzheimer's disease research. "Family members shouldn't ever feel embarrassed to discuss it. That's a stress they don't need."

Listen to your heart. Lea struggled with guilt when her grandmothers were battling Alzheimer's. "I feel like I should have visited more. I wanted to, but I didn't, and I still feel bad about that," she reveals. "Families are told, 'Don't bother going, they don't know you're there.' " Her thought? "If you want to visit a loved one with Alzheimer's, don't let anything keep you from doing so," she says. "But if taking a break feels right, do that. Doing what feels good—such as visiting, taking a walk or spending time with friends—are little ways family members can take care of themselves." ▶

close to my heart

[COVER story]

Accept help. “Caregivers are emotionally and physically exhausted. It’s one of the hardest jobs you’ll ever have,” notes Lea. Whenever she could, Lea helped both her mother and mother-in-law. “I was there to talk, listen, pitch in and do whatever was necessary to care for them, the caregivers.” Joining support groups helped, too. “It’s comforting to know you’re not the only one going through this very tough time.”

Heal with humor. “It’s understandable to get frustrated,” says Lea. “You want your loved one to ‘go back to normal,’ and it’s hard to accept that’s not going to happen.” When Lea’s stepfather was slipping away, she coped by taking a laughter break. “I would watch a funny movie, listen to comedy or look for little humorous events during the day. Anything that makes you smile helps relieve tension.”

Struggling with memory loss?

If you’re concerned about memory problems—whether your own or a family member’s—it’s important to see a doctor. Although there’s no cure for Alzheimer’s disease, there are medications that may help slow memory loss—but they have to be taken early, before the losses become severe. And take heart: Memory problems aren’t always a sign of Alzheimer’s. Certain conditions can mimic the disease, and many of them are treatable. In fact, up to 5% of Americans diagnosed with dementia may have a treatable condition called normal pressure hydrocephalus (NPH), an abnormal buildup of fluid in the brain.

Find meaning in the moment. “Even though my stepfather couldn’t put words together, there were special moments when we spent time together or I helped my mother care for him,” she says. In some ways, her experience mirrored the hopeful message found in *Back to the Future*: “It’s a movie that’s funny, well-crafted and has an interesting premise: that changing how you live your life can totally change the outcome. It’s life-affirming.” 📺
—Gina Roberts-Grey