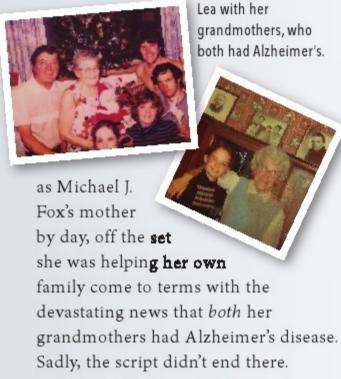


## COVER story

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



"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?

lems—whether your own or a family Although there's no cure for Alzheimer's severe. And take heart: Memory problems aren't always a sign of Alzheimer's. Certain 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 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