

# Care for the Caregiver

Being a caregiver for an ailing parent, spouse, child, other relative or friend can be a very challenging and difficult responsibility. While caring for someone else can be very rewarding, it can also be a stressful and demanding one, taking its toll both emotionally and physically on the caregiver. When caregivers do not attend to their own needs and allow other pressures to take over, they may lose their ability to continue to care for their loved one or friend. It is imperative to keep oneself both mentally and physically healthy in order to be able to give quality care to the ill person.

Care for an Alzheimer's or chronically ill person usually begins at home with one or more people acting as the primary caregiver. The first step is often seeking and receiving a complete medical work up and diagnosis, and devising a treatment plan. The needs of the chronically ill, whether part-time or full-time care is needed, must be determined and may change over time as the person's condition changes. It is vitally important for the caregiver to be aware of potential problems and prepare for unique challenges that may be associated with a particular illness. The caregiver should gather information and research regarding what treatment and resources are available to assist both the patient and the caregiver. Whether you are a spouse or child who lives with the ill person or are someone who lives hundreds of miles away, having a chronically ill relative or friend can be a tremendous life changing event for the caregiver as well as the patient. When caregivers fail to provide for their own needs and well-being, "burnout" can occur. It is important to recognize the signs and symptoms of caregiver burnout to avoid becoming stressed and overwhelmed.

Some of the most common signs of burnout include:

- Irritability: "snapping" at people for small things or easily losing patience
- Withdrawal: not staying in touch with friends or continuing with activities
- Fatigue: being constantly tired and exhausted
- Apathy: feeling numb and having to force routine caregiver tasks
- Appetite changes: eating more or less than before
- Increased substance use: seeking relief from alcohol, drugs or tobacco

- Feelings of guilt: thinking that efforts are inadequate, or feelings of resentment about the amount of work needed

In order to care for someone else, the caregiver must care for themselves. The caregiver's mental and physical well-being is as important as those of the patient. A metaphor to exemplify this would be that if you don't put gas in the car or take it in for service when needed, it will eventually stop running. Human beings are the same way; if we don't provide for some "time away" from our work and/or responsibilities, we will eventually stop operating effectively or "run out of gas". Be aware of how much is needed and try to set good limits. Remember, there are no super-humans and everyone needs to care for themselves.

Here are some tips for providing good self-care:

- **Exercise:** Even if there is no time for a formal workout, incorporate exercise into the daily routine; walking is especially effective.
- **Eat properly:** Many times caregivers are so preoccupied with the nutritional needs of the patient, their own nutritional needs are neglected.
- **Read:** reading for pleasure or for information can be a wonderful outlet for stress.
- **Get a massage.**
- **Pursue a hobby:** It is important not to lose touch with the things that give you pleasure. Continue to do things that bring joy, even if it's less frequent than before.
- **Use relaxation techniques:** Whether progressive relaxation, deep breathing or visual imagery, anyone can incorporate these into their daily life.
- **Keep a journal:** Journaling is a good way to write about thoughts, feelings and daily events.
- **Use a support network:** Don't be afraid to ask friends, family, community, and/or church resources for assistance.
- **"Blow off some steam":** Go to a movie, go out to dinner and have some fun. It is okay to enjoy yourself at times and not focus all energy on loved one's needs.

- **Join a support group in the community or on-line:** It is important to connect with others who share similar experiences.
- **Watch for signs of depression:** Depression is very common in caregivers. Get extra support and professional help if needed.

Sometimes it may be necessary for the caregiver to arrange for a substitute to provide care for their loved one. Respite is the provision of temporary relief to the family members or other primary caregivers for an individual at home. It can be “group respite” where supervised activities are offered in a supportive and safe environment outside the home or it can be “individual respite” provided by an agency worker, volunteer or friend within the home. There is also a service called “institutional respite” where the ill person is temporarily placed in a long-term facility or hospital setting to provide the caregiver relief from caregiving responsibilities. Another type of respite care called “**adult daycare**” is where the loved one goes on a daily basis to a supervised program which has been approved by the state to provide certain levels of care. It is vital that all caregivers of chronically ill people make time for themselves and seek available assistance from family, friends and available community and faith-based resources. For further information contact the Commission on Aging Agency in your county or a home care agency near you.

Two excellent websites are:

The National Family Caregivers Association: [www.nfcacares.org](http://www.nfcacares.org)

The National Council on Aging: [www.ncoa.org](http://www.ncoa.org)

Written by: Marsha Phillips, M.A., L.P.C.

Reference:

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