

Caregiver Health: Taking Care of Yourself

One of the challenges we face as we work with those who have been called to care for a loved one is convincing them to take good of themselves. This is easy to understand. You may feel that you do not have a right to tend to your own needs when your loved one is seriously ill or experiencing physical limitations. And then there are the other responsibilities that can place demands on your time—a spouse, children, and work. But, to be an effective caregiver, you also need to take good care of yourself. If you neglect your own health, you run the risk of becoming ill and then not being able to care for your loved one. Here are some suggestions that we hope you will take to heart.

- **Take breaks from caregiving.** Time away from caregiving responsibilities—often referred to as “respite”—is essential to your health, which can impact the health of your loved one. Although it may seem difficult to arrange these periods of respite, there are several options that might be available to you.
 - *In-home respite care*—Ask a family member or friend to stay with your loved one so you can take care of your own responsibilities or get together with friends. Some community organizations, including religious congregations, have volunteers who are trained to provide in-home respite care for a few hours. For a fee, home health services can provide a personal care aide to stay with your loved one.
 - *Adult day centers*—These centers provide daily care in a group setting for individuals who need supervision. If you need a longer period of respite, check with local nursing homes or assisted living facilities to see if they are able to care for your loved one for several days.
 - *Leisurely activities*—Use your “down time” to care for yourself. Do things that you enjoy and that reenergize you. Read a book, listen to music, or talk on the phone with a good friend.
- **Safeguard your own health and well-being.**
 - *Go to your health care provider for regular checkups.* Let your provider know that caregiving is an important part of your life. Make sure you mention any symptoms or concerns.
 - *Take your medications as prescribed and monitor your own health with the same attention you give your loved one.*
 - *Get a flu shot.* Supplies of the flu vaccine sometimes run short, so be sure to obtain one early in the flu season. You may also want to ask your provider if you should receive the pneumonia vaccine. Being vaccinated may keep you from getting sick as well as from infecting your loved one.
 - *Find time to exercise regularly.* You don’t need to join a gym or participate in exercise classes. Even short walks in your neighborhood can be beneficial to your physical and mental health.

- *Take classes that focus on stress-reduction and coping techniques.* You may find yoga, meditation, and other relaxation techniques particularly helpful.
- *Engage in resilience-building activities.* One example is taking a few minutes at the end of each day to list two or three things that went well and that you can feel good about accomplishing.
- *Continue to participate in religious or spiritual activities, as well as recreational activities, sports or hobbies.* You may not be able to be as involved as you were previously, but it is important that you continue to engage in at least some of the activities that meet your spiritual, emotional, and social needs.
- *Know your employee rights.* If the demands of caregiving reach the point where they conflict with your work responsibilities, you may want to take advantage of the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA). This act allows eligible employees who work for an organization with 50 or more employees and who are caring for a spouse, parent or child with a serious health condition to take up to 12 weeks of unpaid, job-protected leave from work. Government agencies and elementary and secondary schools also are covered by FMLA, regardless of the number of employees.
- *Join a support group.* It is not unusual to feel isolated when you are devoting so much of your time to caring for a loved one. One valuable way to overcome these feelings is to join a support group where you will find others who understand the stresses and challenges you are facing. Members also may offer valuable advice, coping strategies, and resources. Some support groups are designed for all caregivers, while others are for individuals who care for people with a particular medical condition.

NOTE: The demands of caregiving can be overwhelming, often putting the caregiver's own health at risk. It is not unusual for caregivers to experience stress-related disorders, including depression. If you are feeling down, depressed, or hopeless; have little interest in things you previously enjoyed; have trouble falling or staying asleep; have lost your appetite or have trouble concentrating, talk with your health care provider or a mental health professional. There are effective strategies and treatments that can help restore your energy and lift your spirits.



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