

Preventing Caregiver Burnout

Tips and Support for Family Caregivers

Outside the world of paid work, the people most prone to burnout are caregivers – people who devote themselves to the unpaid care of chronically ill or disabled family members. The demands of caregiving can be overwhelming, especially if you feel you have little control over the situation or that you're in over your head.

If you let the stress of caregiving progress to burnout, it can damage both your physical and mental health. So if you're caring for a family member, it's essential that you get the support you need. The good news is that you're not alone. Help for caregivers is available.

Family caregivers: What you should know about burnout

Providing care for a family member in need is a centuries-old act of kindness, love, and loyalty. And as life expectancies increase and medical treatments advance, more and more of us will participate in the caregiving process, either as the caregiver, the recipient of care, or possibly both.

Unfortunately, caregiving can take a heavy toll if you don't get adequate support. Caregiving involves many stressors: changes in the family dynamic, household disruption, financial pressure, and the sheer amount of work involved. The rewards of caregiving – if they come at all – are intangible and far off, and often there is no hope for a happy outcome.

As the stress piles up, frustration and despair take hold and burnout becomes a very real danger. But you can prevent caregiver burnout by following a few essential guidelines:

- **Learn as much as you can** about your family member's illness and about how to be a caregiver as you can. The more you know, the more effective you'll be, and the better you'll feel about your efforts.
- **Know your limits.** Be realistic about how much of your time and yourself you can give. Set clear limits, and communicate those limits to doctors, family members, and other people involved.
- **Accept your feelings.** Caregiving can trigger a host of difficult emotions, including anger, fear, resentment, guilt, helplessness, and grief. As long as you don't compromise the well-being of the care receiver, allow yourself to feel what you feel.
- **Confide in others.** Talk to people about what you feel; don't keep your emotions bottled up. Caregiver support groups are invaluable, but trusted friends and family members can help too. You may also benefit from seeing a therapist or counselor.

10 Tips for Family Caregivers

- Caregiving is a job and respite is your earned right. Reward yourself with respite breaks often.
- Watch out for signs of depression, and don't delay in getting professional help when you need it.
- When people offer to help, accept the offer and suggest specific things that they can do.
- Educate yourself about your loved one's condition and how to communicate effectively with doctors.
- There's a difference between caring and doing. Be open to technologies and ideas that promote your loved one's independence.
- Trust your instincts. Most of the time they'll lead you in the right direction.
- Caregivers often do a lot of lifting, pushing, and pulling. Be good to your back.
- Grieve for your losses, and then allow yourself to dream new dreams.
- Seek support from other caregivers. There is great strength in knowing you are not alone.
- Stand up for your rights as a caregiver and a citizen.
- Source: National Family Caregiver's Association

Warning signs of caregiver burnout

Once you burn out, caregiving is no longer a healthy option for either you or the person you're caring for. So it's important to watch for the warning signs of caregiver burnout and take action right away when you recognize the problem.

Common warning signs of caregiver burnout:

- You have much less energy than you used to
- It seems like you catch every cold or flu that's going around
- You're constantly exhausted, even after sleeping or taking a break
- You neglect your own needs, either because you're too busy or you don't care anymore
- Your life revolves around caregiving, but it gives you little satisfaction
- You have trouble relaxing, even when help is available
- You're increasingly impatient and irritable with the person you're caring for
- You feel overwhelmed, helpless, and hopeless

Preventing caregiver burnout tip 1: Get the help you need

The first strategy for preventing caregiver burnout is: Don't try to do it all alone. Taking on all of the responsibilities of caregiving without regular breaks or assistance is a surefire recipe for burnout.

Ask for help when you need it. Enlist friends and family who live near you to run errands, bring a hot meal, or "baby-sit" the care receiver so you can take a well-deserved break.

Also, there are services to help caregivers in most communities, and the cost is often based on ability to pay or covered by the care receiver's insurance. Services that may be available in your community include adult day care centers, home health aides, home-delivered meals, respite care, transportation services, and skilled nursing.

Caregiver services in your community – Call your local Area Agency on Aging, senior center, senior services organization, county information and referral service, university gerontology department, family service, or hospital social work unit for contact suggestions.

Caregiver support for veterans – If your care recipient is a Veteran, home health care coverage, financial support, nursing home care, and adult day care benefits may be available. Some Veterans Administration programs are free, while others require co-payments, depending upon the veteran's status, income, and other criteria.

Your family member's affiliations – Fraternal organizations such as the Elks, Eagles, or Moose lodges may offer some assistance if your family member is a longtime dues-paying member. This help may take the form of phone check-ins, home visits, or transportation.

Community transportation services – Many community transportation services are free for your care recipient, while others may have a nominal fee or ask for a donation. Your local Area Agency on Aging (AAA) can help you locate transportation to and from adult day care, senior centers, shopping malls, and doctor's appointments.

Telephone check-ins – Telephone reassurance provides prescheduled calls to homebound older adults to reduce their isolation and monitor their well-being. Check with your local AAA, religious groups, senior centers, and other public or nonprofit organizations.

Adult day care – If your loved one is well enough, consider the possibility of adult day care. An adult day care center can provide you with needed breaks during the day or week, and your loved one with some valuable diversions and activities.

Preventing caregiver burnout tip 2: Seek emotional support

Pablo Casals, the world-renowned cellist, said, "The capacity to care is the thing that gives life its deepest significance and meaning." Although caregivers are often isolated from others, it's essential that you receive the emotional support you need, so you don't lose that capacity.

Share what you're going through with at least one other person. Turn to a trusted friend or family member, join a support group, or make an appointment with a counselor or therapist. You can also draw strength from your faith. A congregation in a church or synagogue can provide the encouragement you need to feel good about your caregiving role, and may also be able to provide a break from time to time.

The value of caregiver support groups

Remember that old adage, "trouble shared is trouble halved"? A caregiver support group is one way to share your troubles. Seek out people who are going through the same experiences that you are living each day. If you can't leave the house, many Internet services are available.

In most support groups, you'll talk about your problems and listen to others talk; you'll not only get help, but you'll be able to help others, too. Most important, you'll find out that you're not alone. You'll feel better knowing that other people are in the same situation, and their knowledge can be invaluable, especially if they're dealing with the same illness you are.

To find a community support group, check the yellow pages, ask your doctor or hospital, or call a local organization that deals with the health problem you would like to address in a support group. To find an Internet support group, visit the website of an organization dedicated to the problem or do a web search on the name of the problem.

Preventing caregiver burnout tip 2: Take care of yourself

When you are a caregiver, finding time to nurture yourself might seem impossible. But you owe it to yourself to find the time. Without it, you may not have the mental or physical strength to deal with all of the stress you experience as a caregiver. Give yourself permission to rest and to do things that you enjoy on a daily basis. You will be a better caregiver for it.

Tips for taking care of yourself:

- Incorporate activities that give you pleasure even when you don't really feel like it. Listen to music, work in the garden, engage in a hobby...whatever it is that you enjoy.
- Pamper yourself. Take a warm bath and light candles. Find some time for a manicure or a massage.
- Eat balanced meals to nurture your body. Find time to exercise even if it's a short walk everyday. Do the best you can to sleep at least 7 hours a night.
- Laughter really is the best medicine. Buy a light-hearted book or rent a comedy. Whenever you can, try to find some humor in everyday situations.
- Keep a journal. Write down your thoughts and feelings. This helps provide perspective on your situation and serves as an important release for your emotions.
- Arrange a telephone contact with a family member, a friend, or a volunteer from a church or senior center so that someone calls each day to be sure everything is all right. This person can help by contacting other family members with status updates or to let them know if you need anything.

- Try to set a time for afternoons or evenings out. Seek out friends and family to help you so that you can have some time away from the home. If it is difficult to leave, invite friends and family over to visit with you. Share some tea or coffee. It is important that you interact with others.

Melinda Smith, M.A. and Gina Kemp, M.A., contributed to this article. Last modified: December 2008.