

Caregiver Wellness— It's Up to You

Caring for someone else can be rewarding and exhausting. Often, caregivers say, "My husband is the one with cancer, but now I'm the one in the hospital!" The combination of loss, prolonged stress, and physical demands of caregiving, along with the biological changes that occur with age, can place caregivers at risk for significant health problems, as well as an earlier death.

If you are a caregiver, especially for someone with an ongoing disease or at the end of life, your role is likely to continually evolve as you meet your loved one's changing needs. Therefore, you must continually re-evaluate your own state of wellness, acknowledge your strengths, and keep working toward the best possible health. Yet it's important to attend to more than just your physical and emotional health. Be sure you're taking care of all aspects of your self.

You can benefit tremendously from a variety of wellness and stress management techniques. These techniques help you take care of yourself and your needs so you can be in the best possible position to help the person you care for.

Remember the Basics

One of the most important ways you can stay healthy is to "tend to the basics" and make self-care a priority. You will not be able to care for your loved one if you are not taking care of yourself.

You must continually re-evaluate your own state of wellness, acknowledge your strengths, and keep working toward the best possible health.

- Maintain good nutrition. Eating a well-balanced, organic, nutritious diet, eat at regular intervals, and take the time to sit and enjoy your food. Avoid eating processed foods and snacking. Instead, try fresh fruit and vegetables. Seek the advice of a healthcare professional if you need assistance or advice.
- Even though you may not feel like doing it when you are stressed, exercise is a powerful stress reliever. Aim for 30 minutes of exercise on most days to help fight fatigue and boost your energy level.
- Get plenty of sleep. Each person requires a different amount of sleep to function optimally, although at least 7 to 8 hours per night is recommended. When you are properly rested, you are better able to cope with the challenges that come your way.
- Avoid drinking, smoking, or taking medications to cope with the stresses of caregiving.

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- Set aside a minimum of 30 minutes every day for you to do whatever you enjoy, whether it is reading, taking your dog for a walk, working in the garden, or watching a favorite television program.
- Take breaks when you need them, arrange for respite care if you need time away (even for a short period), and ask for help before your health suffers.
- Make yourself laugh. Watch a funny movie, read a funny book, or call a friend who makes you laugh. Try to find humor in everyday situations.
- Find ways to pamper yourself with small luxuries. Take a long, hot bath, get a manicure, or buy fresh flowers for your home.
- Try meditating, deep breathing, or yoga to boost feelings of joy, well-being, and peace.
- Support your spirit. Caregiving can test the strongest spirit and lead to feelings of loneliness and emptiness. Finding meaning and purpose in caregiving is essential but this may be difficult just because of the overwhelming preoccupation you may feel by all the practical details of caregiving. Seek out spiritual assistance (through pastors, chaplains, or other spiritual care providers), ask for help before you become ill, and engage in activities that support your spiritual life (such as prayer, spending time in nature, or getting together with friends).

Find Support

Caregivers may often feel a range of emotions from anger, fear, and guilt to sadness, depression, jealousy, helplessness, and despair. Support groups are one option to provide you with a safe place to share your emotions and experiences, seek and give advice, and exchange practical information with others.

Support groups help you realize you are not alone in your feelings and experiences. Offered all over the country and in many communities, they provide a wonderful opportunity for informal networking and positive peer group relationships.

You can also obtain support from many sources such as mental health teams, physicians, psychiatrists, nurses, spiritual care providers (such as pastors), social workers, and case managers.

Consider Self-Reflection and Self-Awareness

Self-reflection is a process of turning your attention or awareness inward to examine your thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and behaviors. It includes self-exploration, recognizing your strengths and weaknesses, and knowing your self.

By increasing your self-awareness, you can better understand your outward behavior and how others respond to it, thereby improving your personal relationships. Self-awareness is closely linked to the concept of living in the present, because lessons learned from the past are important in improving behavior in the present leading to greater peace of mind.

There are several ways you can improve your ability to self-reflect and be self-aware:

- **Consider your personal thinking style.** Sometimes people think in a focused way, and at other times they think more broadly. Those with an internal locus of control (a tendency to believe they have control over their lives and environment) tend to have higher self-esteem than those who have an external locus of control (a belief that they have little or no control over the environment). Thinking is more positive with an internal locus of control.
- **Be aware of your intuitive powers.** Intuition can provide important information about your inner self and often involves a strong feeling of certainty that may be accompanied by a sense of mystery.
- **Be aware of your emotions and feelings.** As you become more self-reflective, explore ways in which you might need to change to better cope with the stresses of caregiving. Think about how you express yourself spontaneously or in controlled ways, how you share your feelings, and how you use catharsis to move forward.
- **Be sensitive to your body's signals.** Watch how you are breathing and how your digestion, skin, or muscles feel when you are stressed versus when you are relaxed. Take steps to decrease your stress and regularly "check in" with your body.
- **Be aware of the environment.** Consider how you obtain information from your environment

through sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste. Take time to look at your environment and find ways to make it peaceful, relaxing, and pleasant to all your senses.

- **Be aware of how you relate to others.** People can tell a lot about you by what you show of yourself, your appearance, your general demeanor, and what you say. Verbal and nonverbal behavior also tells a story about who you are. Assertiveness is a positive strategy of relating and is a means of insisting on having your interests respected without being disrespectful of others.

Reframe Your Perspective

Stressors abound in life, and your perception of the stressor, not the stressor itself, makes for either a "mountain" or a "molehill." Cognitive restructuring is a technique that substitutes negative, self-defeating thoughts with positive, affirming thoughts to change the perception of the stressor from threatening to nonthreatening.

Negative thoughts and attitudes have been shown to depress the immune system, decrease life expectancy, and affect mental health. Psychologists use the term self-fulfilling prophecy to describe the link between perceptions, beliefs, and related behaviors.

Cognitive restructuring can be achieved through four simple steps:

1. Be aware of stressors and acknowledge them. Identify why these situations and events are stressors and identify the emotions associated with them.
2. Reappraise the situation. See whether a different (more objective) viewpoint restructures the situation. Understand which situations you can control and which must be accepted as out of your control.
3. Adopt the new frame of mind, substituting a negative perspective for a positive one.
4. Evaluate whether this process worked and, if so, how beneficial it was so you can decide whether to use it again.

Communicate Effectively

The ability to communicate effectively is an essential tool in managing stress. If most people were to list their top 10 stressors, at least half of them would probably deal with relationships with family, friends, and colleagues. Caregivers would probably find this to be especially true. Strong relationships require good communication skills. The average person spends 75% of the day communicating with others. The degree of perception and interpretation required, as well as the many layers of meaning in every interaction, leave much room for misinterpretation and therefore stress.

Effective communication includes the ability to express thoughts and feelings in understandable words. It also means listening actively, using silence effectively and appropriately, being aware of body language, reflecting (e.g., repeating the person's words to demonstrate listening), summarizing what was said, and self-awareness.

Use Imagery

If you are like most people, your imagination is probably one of your least utilized resources. But imagination is very powerful and can be used to remember and re-create the past, develop insights into the present, influence physical health, enhance creativity, inspire, and anticipate the future. Imagination is useful when utilizing imagery since an effective imagination helps you produce the mental images needed for the process.

Imagery is a flow of thoughts that you can see, hear, feel, smell, or taste in your imagination. It is a rich, symbolic, highly personal language that involves fantasy as well as experience.

Imagery has three main characteristics that assist in the healing process:

- It directly affects your physiology.
- It provides insight and perspective into health by using association and combining elements together.
- It is intimately connected to your emotions, which are at the root of many health conditions.

Imagery influences your heart rate, blood pressure, respiration, brainwave rhythms, gastrointestinal

function, sexual arousal, levels of hormones and neurotransmitters in the blood, and immune system function.

But imagery is probably most useful when it helps you find meaning in difficult or challenging events and situations and helps you control your patterns of thinking. It makes your mind more receptive to new information, helps reduce fear, anxiety, and pain, and helps reduce your body's stress responses.

Use Art To Heal

Nearly everyone has found himself or herself doodling while talking on the phone, or painting or sculpting as a hobby. When creating any kind of art, you may find that your feelings and ideas change, and you may even feel yourself transported away from your everyday worries. Involvement with art can alter feelings, clear your mind, and raise your consciousness. Involvement with art is a very therapeutic process.

The ability of the arts to enhance health has been known since the beginning of time. Art as a wellness strategy improves relaxation and helps you be more aware of challenging physical and emotional issues. One of the greatest effects of art is its ability to help you heal after experiencing pain, loss, and/or death. Caregivers who use art therapy often find that the spontaneous, uncensored nature of art therapy provides a powerful, healing, and revealing therapeutic release that can bring feelings of pleasure and relaxation. Art therapy can help you or your loved one feel less pain, reduce the amount of pain medication needed, decrease anxiety levels, and lower blood pressure, heart rate, and respiratory rates.

Write It Down

Originating from the French word *journée*, meaning "from sunrise to sunset," journals began as a way to orient the traveler home.

Journaling is a creative, fulfilling, insightful, and therapeutic exercise. By writing about an experience, you make it your own, explore its meaning, and ultimately experience a way to release the experience and the feelings associated with it. Journaling improves your physical health, enhances your immune system, improves your wound healing and memory function, and results in fewer visits to medical practitioners. It relieves stress and improves relaxation,

lessens fatigue and pain, reduces high blood pressure, and improves sleep.

Journaling provides an opportunity to control and organize your thoughts and, by transferring the thoughts to paper, to avoid low-grade stress. Since most people naturally struggle to fully express all their emotions to others verbally, journaling provides a way to release at least some toxic or stressful thoughts via writing.

Journaling should not replace medical treatment, but it is effective in working through issues that might otherwise stay hidden or suppressed. Deep-seated emotional issues may surface and cause sadness but, over time, the process of writing down thoughts and insights you feel calmer, happier, and more accepting of yourself.

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