

FEATURE STORY

For the Caregiver: Taking Care of Yourself

How and why caregivers should care for themselves

In the chaos and intensity that surrounds a new cancer diagnosis, everyone tends to focus all of their care and concern on the patient. While caregivers tend to brush their own needs aside, experts warn that selfless devotion can backfire.

The constant stress of caregiving can make you more vulnerable to getting sick or burnt out. Take a look at your stress level and try to prevent burnout before it hits. Make a list of what triggers your stress, then make another list of steps to reduce that stress. Here are some ways to prevent burnout.

Reach out. Caring for someone full time can lead to feelings of panic, despair, and isolation. And after the initial crisis of diagnosis and treatment, there's a lingering worry that the cancer could return. Reach out to friends and family, online chat groups, and support organizations to help reduce feelings of isolation.

Support groups for cancer patients and caregivers can be located through local hospitals or the American Cancer Society. It makes a huge difference to feel you're not the only one having these feelings. Try exercise, meditation, and other stress reduction techniques. If nothing seems to help, it may be time to see a therapist or doctor.

Accept help. If a friend or neighbor asks what they can do to help, tell them. Veteran caregivers suggest keeping a list in your pocket. That way, you can pull it out and let them know exactly what you need. If friends or relatives are not available to step in for a few hours, hire someone or find adult day care. The U.S. Administration on Aging offers a national database of elder care providers at www.eldercare.gov.

Get some sleep. To overcome insomnia, experts suggest everything from guided imagery and relaxation techniques to acupuncture and even warm milk. Cutting back on late afternoon caffeine and boosting your exercise, especially yoga, may also help caregivers sleep better. Sometimes it helps to write down your worries and "release" them for the day before heading to bed. If all else fails, it may be

time to talk to the doctor about a non-addictive sleep aid.

Keep up your health. With everything they have to do in a day, caregivers often neglect basic health maintenance. Some simple things to keep in mind include eating regular meals that are rich in fruits and vegetables, staying hydrated, and exercising, even if it's a brisk 15-minute walk each day (increase it to 30 to 45 minutes when you can). Line up help so you can keep your regular appointments for dental cleanings, health screenings, and annual checkups.

Find meaning. If you can take your experience with cancer and learn from it, you may have less depression and anxiety. Caregiving can help you find more meaning in your life and focus on your highest priorities. Work on your personal growth. Participate in an art therapy workshop, begin a journal, talk with a counselor, or lean on your faith or spiritual community.