

Self Care for Caregivers Support Ideas



- Find something positive.

Little things like saying thank you to someone for a small gesture such as holding the door, expressing your appreciation to a spouse/partner, coworker or child and writing thank you notes for gifts can make a difference for both you and the other person. Write down several things each day that you are grateful for or appreciate. It helps to identify three things at the end of the day that went well or left you feeling gratitude. (Included sheets)

- Find ways to relax.

Rest and relaxation are critical to managing stress and minimizing anxiety. Those who find it difficult to let go and relax may find yoga, breathing or stress management classes helpful. Regulating your breath has a calming effect on the mind and loosens tension held in the body. Sitting quietly at home for 5-10 minutes each day to simply be aware of your breathing can enhance relaxation. Try a meditation app such as Insight Timer, or HeadSpace.

Self Care for Caregivers Support Ideas



- Move around every day.

Exercise and movement can include gardening, playing with your pets, dancing, stretching, etc. Movement improves cardiovascular health, flexibility, strengthens muscles and improves mental health. Exercise also oxygenates your body and brain providing clearer thinking and creativity. So many exercise programs are now available virtually, you can do it anytime.

- Engage in good conversation.

Spending time with good friends, even online or on the phone, and engaging in stimulating conversation with a neighbor is good for the soul (mind and body). When we share our thoughts with others, we establish an emotional and mental connection that can be refreshing and heartwarming.

Self Care for Caregivers

Support Ideas



- Get enough sleep.

Good sleep hygiene involves cutting out caffeine after 5 PM, turning off electronics two hours before bedtime, eating your last meal two or more hours before you turn in for the night, going to bed early enough to get 6-8 hours of sleep, darkening the room you sleep in. It is helpful to create a sleep habit of going to bed and arising at the same time everyday.

- Keep up with your medical needs.

Annual physicals, biannual dental checkups and cleanings, mammograms, pap smears, etc. are proactive habits for good health. Many advocate an annual mental health screening, which may be part of the annual physical at some point.

Self Care for Caregivers

Support Ideas



- Treat yourself regularly.

See a movie, eat dinner at a restaurant, sit in the park, get a massage, get a manicure/pedicure, buy yourself flowers – whatever you enjoy – do that for yourself. These are also ways to find respite from your duties.

- Engage in a hobby.

Build an airplane, play cards, get lost in good books, take up sewing or knitting – anything that relaxes you – do that.

- Eat healthily.

It's easy to stop and grab fast food when you are short on time or skip a meal. With so many fast casual restaurants (Panera, Chipotle, Zoe's, etc) it's easier to stop and grab a healthy meal. Or, cook something that will give you meals for a couple of days, like a good soup, or pot roast or roast a chicken and then make chicken salad. Keep fresh fruits handy. If your parent is in a care facility, take lunch to have with them.

(Adapted from Good Mental Health: Self Care)



Taking Care of Yourself is Part of the Job

The job of becoming the primary caregiver for your aging parent is universally recognized as one of the most difficult transitions we will go through. To start with, it's hard to go through the reversal of parent and child. All your life, mom or dad were the strong ones. They were the ones you ran to for help and who were always there to tell you, "It's ok. Everything will be alright."

But now as your loved one ages and you have to witness their demise mentally and physically, you realize that everything may not be alright, especially if your loved one is going through a slow decline of a terminal illness. When the only outcome of what you are dealing with in your parent's life is death, that makes it tough to stay upbeat, creative and proactive about how to handle life's daily challenges.

The task of caring for an elderly parent is overwhelming. You have concerns about their finances, their medications, the progress of their disease if they are battling something terminal, their mental state, their diet and their emotional state as well. It's easy to begin to "hover" your senior citizen in an emotional attempt to block any more harm coming to him or her. This is a parenting instinct and one that your dad and mom probably won't resist because they want to be cared for.



Keeping It At Arm's Length

Sometimes when you have a very consuming problem, it can so take over your life that you forget the rest of life's responsibilities and relationships. That is certainly a danger that caregivers are faced with. It is easy to become so wrapped up in the demands of being a good caregiver for your aging parent or loved one that the rest of the world seems to disappear.

This is never a healthy way to take on the challenge of caregiving. Not only would it be terrible for your family, job, and friends to see you vanish into the task of care giving and never be available for anyone else, it's also a bad idea for both you and your elderly parent for you to obsess that much.

This is a formula for caregiver burnout which can lead to medical problems, loss of sleep, eating disorders and maybe even a nervous breakdown. So, the healthy approach to being a caregiver is to keep the demands of that part of your life at arm's length so you can establish a balance between your life with your senior citizen and work and family life as well.



One way to begin laying the groundwork for keeping that balance in right ratio to your life is to have an honest talk about the issue with your elderly parent who you are caring for. Sometimes the force draws you in to wanting to give it all to the task of caregiving. But if you talk about it in a rational way when both of you are rested and thinking calmly, your parent will see that she doesn't want you to give up your life to be her caregiver exclusively. Oh sure, sometimes when she is sad or lonely, she says things like “I wish you could stay here all the time.” But that is not rational, and she knows you need to be a mature adult and take care of your job responsibilities and your spouse and children as well.

Another person you should have a frank discussion about the demands you are going through as a caregiver for your elderly parent is your boss at work. In the modern world, businesses need hard working and well-trained individuals like you. And this is a time when a lot of baby boomers are becoming “sandwich generation” people and have that additional demand of caring for an elderly parent along with home and work responsibilities. So, your work will want to work with you to get through this rather than lose you entirely.



Your employer may be able to work with you to give you some flexibility so that if you must have time during the day to take your parent to the doctors or attend to some other need in your parents' life, you can make up the time or attend to your work in other ways. Many employers will even allow you to take work home with you and split your time between the office, your family life and your caregiving responsibilities. There are even extended leave programs that some larger companies have where you can take a few months off to care for your parent during a time when you must give her all your time. This is invaluable during time when you are moving her from her own home to the assisted living center or if your parent is terminally ill and you need to be constantly available in those last months of her life.

Above all, solicit the support and love of your spouse and kids. If mommy must be over at grandmas every evening for a few hours, it may call on the dad and kids to whip up some macaroni and cheese or just get in the car and go get some fast food to cut mom some slack to take care of the needs of that aging senior citizen. Your family, your work associates and your friends can handle giving you that time if you are open with them about what is going on and they see the need. But do make time to see them and be with others so the job of being a caregiver doesn't overwhelm you. You need them as much or more than they need you during this time.

Caregiver Coping Skills Worksheet



Use this log to monitor how well your coping skills work. Rate the level of success 1 – 5, with 1 as the least successful and 5 being the most successful. Record any after thoughts about what might have worked better or why a specific skill worked/didn't work at that time.

Feeling	Coping Skills Used	Success	After Thoughts
<i>Loneliness</i>	<i>Call Manuela & invited her out</i>	4	<i>I really need to remember to rely on the people closest to me more.</i>

The Coping Question Worksheet



Life can be overwhelming at times, especially when things are tough. Here are some suggestions for how to best cope.

1. Identify the Challenge. Be specific about different aspects of the problem.

2. Reflect On Previous Successes. What have you done in the past to cope with similar problems? (What did you do? Who did you call? Where did you go? What changes did you make to accommodate your needs?)

3. Consider Your Resources. What resources are available within your network to help you with this problem? Think of formal and informational resources (social services agencies, temporary agencies, day care centers, schools, etc.)

4. Remember Your Inner Resilience. List personal qualities of resilience that you possess to bounce back from difficulties in life.



Afterthoughts:



Caregiver Stress Assessment

Check any of the following that apply. You...

- Feel that you have to do it all yourself.
- Feel that you should be doing more.
- Spend less (or no) time with family and friends.
- No longer engage in activities that you once enjoyed.
- Worry about the person you care for – their safety and well-being.
- Not sleeping or eating well.
- Feel anxious about money.
- Worry about making the right health care decisions.
- Minimize the impact of the disease, old age
- Deny how the disease, old age affects you and your family.
- Feel a sense of loss for the relationship you once had with the person you care for.



Check any of the following that apply. You...

- Feel frustrated or angry when caring for your loved one.
- Experience feelings of resentment towards others.
- Are beginning to experience mental or physical health effects.

(Adapted from Alzheimer's Association Caregiver Stress Check)

Scoring

Count the check marks.

1-3: You are coping well – keep it up.

4-8: You are in dangerous territory – let's talk.

9 and above: You and your loved one are at risk – seek professional help.



Self Care

“Compassion automatically invites you to relate with people because you no longer regard people as a drain on your energy.”

Chogyam Trungpa | Meditation Master
