



Taking Care of Yourself

INTRODUCTION

Research studies confirm what anyone who has cared for a chronically ill or disabled relative or friend knows firsthand – such a labor of love can exact an enormous physical, emotional, social, and financial toll. All too often those who provide care to others neglect their own need for self-care. Taking care of oneself is essential if the best care is to be provided to another person. Caregivers must learn how to balance their own needs with the needs of someone who needs care. There is no single recipe for ensuring that one remains a healthy caregiver but the following basic ingredients appear central:

EDUCATE YOURSELF ABOUT THE DISEASE OR MEDICAL CONDITION

Whether you care for someone with heart disease, stroke or dementia or whether care takes place in your own home or at a distance, many of the daily challenges are similar.

- Learn new information and skills and learn how to adapt to the challenges you encounter.
- Get up-to-date and accurate information through books, fact sheets and brochures regarding your relative's condition.
- Contact the appropriate disease-related organization, that can guide you to other resources such as hospital-based education programs and support groups.

FIND A DOCTOR OR ANOTHER HEALTH PROFESSIONAL WHO UNDERSTANDS THE DISEASE

Armed with some knowledge, you are capable of asking the right questions of the patient's doctor.

- Make a short list of questions and assert that you need such questions answered before you leave.
- Good doctors understand the impact of caregiving on you and should be willing to involve you in healthcare decisions that affect both your relative and you.

CONSULT WITH OTHER EXPERTS

You may need additional professional help to plan for the future. For instance:

- You may need legal authority to make healthcare and financial decisions on behalf of your relative.
- A certified financial planner may help you prepare for the possibility of expensive care for your relative in an assisted living facility or other chronic-care facility.
- Getting experts involved as soon as possible may save you a lot of worry later.
- If you are too busy to attend to this matter, make sure someone acts in your behalf to handle it.

TAP YOUR SOCIAL RESOURCES

Other family members and friends can play key roles in helping you to share in the care.

- Organize a family meeting so that everyone can get on the same page and find out what each person may or may not be able to offer. All potential sources of help need to be informed about the tasks at hand for both you and the relative in need of care.
- Make a plan with the family and then meet again a month later to evaluate progress.
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TAKE TIME FOR RELAXATION AND EXERCISE

Let's face it - helping another person can be hard work.

- Set aside time every day from the work of caregiving or you risk losing yourself to the exclusive needs of another person.
- Diversions are necessary in order to be renewed. Enjoy a hobby, see a movie, take a walk, ride a bike, or take part in any number of leisure time activities. You deserve a sense of normalcy. Something enjoyable should be built into every day, if even for just ten minutes, that reminds you that your needs are important, too. Take care of yourself in ways that are meaningful to you.

USE COMMUNITY RESOURCES

Unfortunately, most caregivers delay looking for help outside their social network until they are virtually exhausted.

- Check the local Area Agency on Aging, which administers state and federal funds to help older chronically ill persons and their family caregivers. To find your local Area Agency on Aging, contact the Eldercare Locator (1-800-677-1116 or go to <http://www.eldercare.gov>)
- Other local agencies target the needs of younger disabled people and their families. Such agencies can help you get a well-deserved break by paying for occasional in-home services by someone to relieve you or providing adult day services for your relative.

MAINTAIN YOUR SENSE OF HUMOR

There is nothing funny about a chronic illness, but being able to see humor in difficult situations can bring about much relief.

- Taking a lighthearted view can alter the meaning of a situation that might otherwise appear overwhelmingly depressing. Jokes, comics and funny movies can fill the void if you cannot find something funny on your own.

EXPLORE RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND SPIRITUAL VALUES

Caring for someone with a chronic illness often evokes questions about faith, hope, God and the meaning of life.

- Organized religion may offer a fresh perspective, but spirituality runs deeper than any particular tenet or belief system.

- Individual and group prayer, rituals, meditation, inspirational reading and spiritual direction may shed light on matters of the soul.

SET REALISTIC GOALS

Accustomed to doing things in a hurry, you may be surprised to find out how little you can accomplish when you are responsible for another person.

- Be patient. Set small goals for yourself each day or week and build upon your successes instead of thinking about your failings.
- Learn to appreciate that you are making progress in ensuring that both you and your loved one are getting the best possible care. Finally, celebrate your achievements.

For additional information, contact the National Family Caregiver Support Program, U.S. Administration on Aging.

http://www.aoa.gov/AoARoot/AoA_Programs/HCLTC/Caregiver/index.aspx

Information provided in this fact sheet was adapted from materials submitted by Mather LifeWays Institute on Aging, Evanston, IL. For more information, visit their website <http://www.matherlifeways.com>.

For more information about ACL
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Community Living, Washington DC 20201
Phone: (202) 619 – 0724
Fax: (202) 357 – 3555
Email: ACLinfo@acl.hhs.gov
Web: <http://www.aoa.gov>

