

Caring for the caregiver

"I have come to believe that caring for myself is not self-indulgent. Caring for myself is an act of survival." ~Audre Lorde

Caring for a loved one is one of life's highest honors. According to a study at the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health, most caregivers say they developed a better relationship with the person they cared for, gained a heightened appreciation of life, found hidden strengths and felt a sense of accomplishment. On the flip side, caregiving can be physically and emotionally draining and many caregivers report problems attending to their own health and well-being while managing caregiving responsibilities.

Family caregivers are at an increased risk for stress, burnout, and a host of other maladies including depression, substance abuse, chronic illness and obesity. If you or someone you know is a caregiver, here are some important things to look for and solutions to help with self-care moving forward.

Common signs and symptoms of caregiver stress and burnout

Stress	Burnout
Feeling tired and run down	Very low energy
New or worsening health problems	Weakened immune system; getting sick a lot
Difficulty sleeping	Constant exhaustion, even after sleeping or taking a break
Excessive drinking, smoking, or eating	Displaying addictive behaviors
Feeling increasingly resentful	Unable to experience satisfaction with life
Trouble concentrating	Trouble relaxing, even when help is available
Overreacting to minor nuisances	Growing impatience and irritability with the care recipient
Anxiety, depression, irritability	Feeling helpless and hopeless
Neglecting responsibilities	Lack of motivation and enthusiasm
Cutting back on leisure activities	Neglectful of own needs, due to workload or apathy



Strategies to help improve self-care

Empower yourself

- Acknowledge and embrace your choice to be a caregiver.
- Focus on what you can control and the way you choose to react to problems.
- Make time for things you enjoy to bring yourself happiness. Small doses of joy can make a big difference in your overall well-being.
- Remember to laugh, watch a show, read a book and find humor in the everyday.
- Get out of the house. Spending time with friends, family or by yourself can give you perspective and peace of mind.

Make your health a priority

- Exercise regularly, even if only for 10 minutes at a time.
- Learn and use stress-reduction techniques such as deep breathing, mindfulness, meditation and prayer.
- Don't skip check-ups or medical appointments and be sure to mention you are a caregiver.
- Nurture yourself by eating well and maintaining good sleep habits.

Ask for and accept help

- Locate community resources to lighten your load. Respite care, adult day care, chore services, meal delivery, transportation and a variety of other resources are willing and able to help you.
- Develop open communications with your family to create a clearer understanding of the situation and how they may be able to help you.
- Join a caregiver support group either locally or online and benefit from a safe place to discuss the stresses, challenges and rewards of providing care for a loved one.