



Avoiding Caregiver Burnout

Whether you are caring for a loved one at home, or visiting him or her regularly, caregiving can be exhausting. Caregivers often spend so much time and energy caring for a loved one that they often neglect to care for themselves. At times it may seem difficult to take time out from your caregiving duties to care for yourself, however, it is imperative that you do so. If you neglect your own needs, and don't get enough sleep or take some breaks, you'll be more likely to suffer from "caregiver burnout"—guilt, anger or exhaustion caused by your duties. This guide focuses on avoiding caregiver burnout and finding support groups and other helpful resources designed to give caregivers a break.

A Checklist for Caregiver Burnout

It's important to continually take time out to evaluate your own situation and needs—and seek help. Since it is not always easy to assess your own needs, listen to others. If family members, friends or colleagues express concern that you look run-down and tired, listen to them—and do something about it. In addition, make a habit of reviewing the checklist below every couple of weeks to make sure you are not exhibiting common signs of caregiver distress.

- ◆ Have you withdrawn from close friends, acquaintances and other family members? Do you refuse invitations and stay home most of the time?
- ◆ Have you given up your favorite pastimes and hobbies in order to attend to your caregiving responsibilities?

Tom has been the primary caregiver for his 85-year-old wheelchair-bound wife for the past few years. He explains, "My wife is very dependent on me and I rarely get time to relax. Lately I've noticed that I tire quickly and seem to get colds more easily. I'm worried about how much longer I can continue at this pace. What can I do about these concerns?"

- ◆ Are you feeling depressed, helpless or irritable? Do you cry easily or for no apparent reason?
- ◆ Do you get angry more quickly and easily? Do minor upsets make you furious? Are you taking your frustrations out on others?
- ◆ Have you gained or lost a significant amount of weight?
- ◆ Do you have trouble sleeping?
- ◆ Do you feel exhausted even after a good night's sleep?
- ◆ Do you get ill more often than you used to?
- ◆ Do you suffer from chronic health problems such as headaches, heart palpitations, diarrhea or constipation?

If you answered yes to two or more of these questions, you are probably experiencing some form of caregiver distress. Please take the time to read this guide describing helpful resources and tips for caregivers.

Tips to help you avoid or alleviate caregiver burnout:

- ◆ Don't try to do it all. Share the work with friends and family members who offer to help.



- ◆ Get enough rest, eat well and exercise as often as possible. Taking care of your body is an important first step in taking care of your mind. Remember, if you're strong and healthy, you'll feel better, prevent illness and be of far greater assistance to your loved one.
- ◆ Maintain a sense of humor. Chances are, your loved one and other family members will laugh with you, and tension and stress will be temporarily diffused.
- ◆ Forgive yourself if things don't go just right. When you lose patience, shout or get angry, don't waste energy by being hard on yourself. Immediately give a soft word and gentle touch to your loved one, and to other family members.
- ◆ Be good to yourself. You are entitled to some pleasure and self-indulgence. Treat yourself to a good book, a dinner out, a warm bath, a massage, a movie or some other luxury—you deserve it!
- ◆ Reduce stress. Join a support group, or if it is difficult for you to leave the house, join an online caregiving forum using a home computer with Internet access. Other ways to reduce stress include exercising or yoga, managing your time wisely, and encouraging your loved one to be as self-sufficient as possible.
- ◆ Assess your loved one's needs on a regular basis. Needs and abilities change with age and illness. Make sure you observe changes and reassess your loved one's needs from time to time so you're not taken by surprise.

- ◆ Recognize your own warning signs. Everyone has their own individual set of warning signs that tell them when they're out of balance. Some people become irritable, some drink alcohol more than they normally would; others feel depressed, angry or even physically ill. Understand and recognize your own warning signs and take action. Give yourself a break and investigate the resources designed to help you.

(Source: Alzheimer's Association)

Support Groups for Caregivers

Perhaps one of the best ways to alleviate stress is to join a caregiver support group. Support groups are offered by various organizations and bring together caregivers in similar situations. Ideally, they will help you realize that you are not alone—that the feelings you are experiencing are probably quite common and normal. Support groups allow you to vent frustrations and listen to people who can relate to what you are going through. Almost all support groups are free and some will even provide transportation or sitter services for those who would otherwise be unable to attend. For those people with limited time, or those who are not comfortable speaking in groups, numerous online support groups and caregiver forums (moderated by professionals) can also help.

Caregiving Exchanges

Caregiving exchanges enable caregivers in similar situations to share some of their caregiving responsibilities. For example, a person with similar caregiving responsibilities to your own may offer to care for both your loved one as well as his or her own, in exchange for your services on another day. Caregiving exchanges are usually arranged through informal networking.

Managing Work While Caring for Your Loved One

If you work part- or full-time while also caring for a loved one, you may be feeling particularly pressured or stressed. If appropriate, speak to your employer about your role as caregiver and find out if your workplace offers any special programs or support systems that may help you manage your work and personal life. Although policies vary from company to company, some common forms of employer support are described in this section. *Note*—Eligibility requirements and policies vary greatly; speak to your human resources manager about your unique situation.

Education and Referral Services

Many employers now offer education and referral services as a free benefit to their employees. These services help employees manage their work and personal lives by providing education and referral services on dependent care issues such as elder care. Each program will be set up a bit differently, but in general, employees have access to a trained counselor who can help locate dependent care resources (such as adult care) and support in their area—or nationwide. Ask your benefits manager if your company offers this service.

Flexible Work Arrangements

Some employers may offer flexible work arrangements such as flextime, compressed schedules, job sharing or part-time schedules, which may enable an employee to better care for a loved one while still meeting work responsibilities. Company policies and employee eligibility vary greatly, so speak to your human resources manager to find out if this is an option for you.

Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA)

If you find that your caregiving duties are demanding more of your time, you may be able to take a leave of absence from work. The Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993 guarantees qualifying employees the right to an unpaid leave of absence for up to 12 weeks per year for family medical emergencies. The act mandates that employees who take a leave must be allowed to return to the same job or an equivalent job with the same pay and benefits. In addition, many states offer more generous Family and Medical Leave Acts. Check with your benefits manager to see if you qualify, and what the rules are in your state.

Community Resources and Respite Care

Respite care is temporary care that can be provided inside or outside the home that provides a break for caregivers and offers diversion and socialization for older adults. Additionally, you may be able to utilize community services such as chores and home maintenance, grocery delivery, home-delivered meals, etc. Take advantage of these services to help make your role as a caregiver easier.

Professional Care Options

There are many professional care options that can aid both caregivers and older adults. Some of the more popular choices include adult day care centers, home care and alternative living arrangements.

When to Consider Alternative Living Arrangements

Deciding when to consider moving your loved one to an alternative living arrangement is a personal decision. More often than not, the decision to put a loved one in a care facility falls on the caregiver. This can be an emotional and difficult decision, but one that must be made objectively. If you are feeling overwhelmed by your caregiving responsibilities or feel that you can no longer provide the level of care that your loved one requires, it may be time to investigate alternative living arrangements.

Helpful Resources

Children of Aging Parents

P.O. Box 167
Richboro, PA 18954
800-227-7294
www.caps4caregivers.org

This national, nonprofit organization provides information about caregiving, support groups and other resources. Membership offers enhanced services.

Family Caregiver Alliance

180 Montgomery Street, Suite 1100
San Francisco, CA 94104
800-445-8106
415-434-3388
www.caregiver.org

This organization serves as an information clearinghouse for caregivers and sponsors education and training programs nationwide.

National Family Caregivers Association

10400 Connecticut Avenue, Suite 500
Kensington, MD 20895
800-896-3650
301-942-6430
www.nfcacares.org

This organization's goal is to support family caregivers and promote self-advocacy and self-care for caregivers. It provides caregiving tips, educational materials, and a caregiver newsletter.

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