

Taking Care!

Self-Care for Caregivers is a Must!

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The contribution of informal caregivers often goes unrecognized in our society. These unpaid helpers provide practical assistance and enhance the quality of life for frail or ill older relatives who might otherwise require placement in a long-term care facility (commonly known as a nursing home).

Typically, they are spouses or children; many are seniors themselves. The majority are women.

The relative they care for has physical or cognitive impairment (perhaps both) caused by one or more chronic health conditions, with stroke and dementia being most common.

The caregiving role involves physical, psychological, emotional and financial demands. It's a heavy load, exacerbated by the limited availability of community support services.



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But there are rewards for caregivers, too. These may include a closer relationship with the care receiver; increased creativity and assertiveness; increased insight into their own strengths and limitations; a general increase in compassion for others; re-thinking of values and priorities; and learning to live in the present and appreciate the simpler things in life that make it enjoyable. Then, too, there is the satisfaction of knowing they are doing something meaningful.

The caregiving journey can be long, though, and particularly challenging when the care receiver has heavy hands-on needs, a demanding personality or mental impairment. A variety of emotions may be experienced along the way, including sadness, grief, frustration, anger, resentment, guilt, anxiety and loneliness.

While a certain degree of stress is inevitable, burnout is a serious matter. It's important to watch for physical warning signs: chronic exhaustion, sleep difficulties, significant weight loss or gain, frequent illness and development of chronic health problems.

Emotional red flags are frequent crying; frequent irritation by small annoyances; difficulty controlling one's temper; feeling overwhelmed; a sense of hopelessness; and feelings of inadequacy. In severe cases, burnout can lead to abuse of the care receiver; this signals the need for immediate help.

If you are a caregiver, here are strategies to help keep stress manageable.

Coping Tips:

- Look after your own health: eat nutritious meals, get adequate rest, exercise and see your primary physician regularly.
- Find something relaxing you can do to give yourself a break every day – perhaps enjoying a cup of tea, reading something uplifting, writing in a journal or listening to music.
- Stay connected to supportive people in your social network.
- Simplify your life. Set priorities and don't waste time or energy on unimportant things.
- Accept the reality of your relative's illness i.e. there is nothing you can do to stop it.
- Learn as much as possible about the illness and its management and educate family and friends to help them understand.
- Take things one day at a time. Recognize that there will be difficult days.
- Remind yourself that you are doing your best and are only human. Give yourself permission to feel all emotions that surface, including resentment and frustration.
- Find at least one person you can talk to openly, who will listen and understand.
- Acknowledge that you can't, and shouldn't, do it alone. Accept offers of help. If they're not forthcoming, ask other family members to share the load and be specific about what you need.
- Talk with other caregivers. Join a community support group, or an Internet group if it's hard to get out.
- Take advantage of respite services in your community, such as adult day care programs and overnight respite care.
- Don't promise your relative that they won't ever have to move to a long-term-care home, because you don't know what the future holds.
- Never forget that looking out for your own needs is not selfish; it helps you to be a better caregiver.

Lisa M. Petsche is a social worker and a freelance writer specializing in boomer and senior health matters. She has extensive experience with elder care.