

TAKE CARE

Focusing on You While
Caring for Others



Caring for an aging parent is very rewarding, but it can also take a toll on you emotionally and physically. It's important to take time to care for yourself, because maintaining your own health and well-being is critical to the care you give to others. Use the tips in this book to learn how to manage your stress and make time for yourself so you're at your best to care for your loved one.

RECOGNIZING AND MANAGING STRESS

How to Recognize Stress

Caring for an aging parent or another loved is a big responsibility, and the added demands on your time, finances, and resources can be stressful. Stress can affect your emotional and physical health so it's important to recognize the symptoms. You may be putting too much stress on yourself if you're:

- Feeling overwhelmed
- Sleeping too much or too little
- Gaining or losing weight
- Feeling tired most of the time
- Losing interest in activities you used to enjoy
- Becoming easily irritated or angered
- Feeling constantly worried
- Often feeling sad
- Having frequent headaches, bodily pain, or other physical problems
- Abusing alcohol or drugs, including prescription drugs

If you have any of these symptoms, you're not alone. These stressors are common in caregivers but can be prevented or managed.

Tips for Managing Stress

Managing your stress will help you be at your best when caring for your loved one. Follow these tips to manage the stress and demands of caregiving.

Ask for Help – Enlist the help of other family members and friends. Give each person a responsibility and divide the tasks.

Take Care of Yourself First – Eat well, exercise, get enough sleep, and go to the doctor regularly. You need to take care of yourself or you won't be able to help others.

Develop an Informal Care Team – Make sure to have other people to help you out during emergencies or if your situation is getting too difficult.

Take a Break – Arrange any necessary fill-in family, friends, volunteers, or professional caregivers. Take single days or even a week's vacation.

See the Positive Side – Write down three good things that happened in your day: an interaction with the store clerk, a smile from a stranger, or even a pleasant surprise from a friend. Share these at dinner for a family activity.

Get Organized – Make to-do lists and set a daily routine.

Understand and Express Your Emotions – Feeling anger, frustration, guilt, or grief for your loved one is normal. Talk with your family or friends about this.

Indulge Yourself – Treat yourself. Go out to have dinner or find a relaxing hobby. You need to reward yourself for the wonderful care you're providing. You deserve it!

Relax a Little – Give yourself a foot massage with a tennis ball, stretch a little bit to loosen up your muscles and mind, or spend five minutes deep breathing while focusing on nothing else.

DEALING WITH DEPRESSION

How to Identify Depression

It's normal to have the "blues" or be unhappy from time to time, but when does it become a problem? Caregivers who are constantly stressed are more likely to develop depression and have longer periods of sadness. Everyone experiences depression differently, but these are common signs to look out for:

- Feelings of helplessness and hopelessness
- Sadness
- Anger
- Indifference
- Loss of interest in daily activities
- Loss or gain of appetite and/or weight changes
- Sleep changes
- Anger or irritability
- Loss of energy
- Self-loathing (dislike)
- Reckless behavior
- Thoughts that life is not worth living (seek help right away!)
- Crying
- Lack of energy
- Not able to concentrate

Steps to Deal with Depression

If you think you're depressed, take these steps:

- Talk to your primary care provider if you've had symptoms of depression for more than two weeks or if the symptoms get worse. You can decide together whether you would benefit from treatment.

- Find a counselor or psychotherapist to talk to. Your doctor, nurse practitioner, or physician assistant can help with this.
- Don't isolate yourself. Turn to friends and family for support.
- Join a support group to connect with others who have depression or who are experiencing the challenges of caregiving.
- Eat a healthy diet to boost your mood.
- Be physically active and exercise.
- Call 911 if you're in crisis.

AVOIDING BURNOUT

Effective caregiving begins with you! Taking care of yourself is just as important as the support you provide to your loved one. Follow these tips to recharge!

Rest - One of the most important things you can do for the person you're caring for is to take care of yourself. If you wear yourself out going 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, you risk burning out.



Eat Right – Eat healthy as often as possible. You don't have to follow a strict diet, but eating a well-balanced diet keeps you healthy and increases your energy level.

Communicate Your Needs to Others – Don't expect anyone, even other family members, to read your mind about what you need or what your loved one needs. Let people around you know the things that need to be done and let them know that, occasionally, you can use a hand.

Hydrate – Drink lots of water. Water hydrates your body and keeps you energized. Take vitamins if you don't get enough nutrition from your food.

Accept Help – This can be one of the hardest things to do, but it's one of the best things you can do for your loved one and for yourself. When people offer to help, often caregivers turn them down because they don't want to burden them. Remember: you don't have to do everything yourself. When you have a few moments, really think about what kind of help you need. Then you'll be ready to accept the next offer! When you tell someone something very specific, they're more comfortable doing it, and you'll get the help you need.

Respite – Make a point of getting away for a mini-respite. A movie, lunch out, window shopping, or just walking along the beach or through a park can be enough to get some distance and come back with a fresh perspective on things.

Get Enough Sleep – This is often hard to manage because you're on someone else's schedule. Sleep is one of the best things you can do for yourself. Eight hours are ideal, but getting eight uninterrupted hours of sleep might be impossible. Get what you can in one shot, but take a nap during the day. A short nap can be very refreshing and just the thing you need to get you through the day.

Exercise – Anything will help. Walk around the block a few times a day when you have a few spare minutes. Try yoga, something that will exercise your muscles, yet relax your mind. Meditate. Spend a few quiet minutes alone.

GETTING STARTED WITH EXERCISE

Being active is an important part of being healthy. For caregivers like you, exercise will not only improve your physical and mental well-being, but it will help you sleep and boost your energy. If finding the time to start an exercise routine is hard, make exercise part of your everyday activities. Start small and think of ways you can move as much as possible throughout the day.

- Think of things you like to do. Take it slow and start with five or 10 minutes of the activity a day. Work your way up to 30 minutes a day.
- Find a friend who will exercise with you. You'll help each other become healthier and build your friendship at the same time.
- Take a walk around your neighborhood before every meal.
- Mix it up! Try a few different things so you don't get bored.
- Walk your dog.
- Plant a garden in your yard.
- Clean your house.
- Take the stairs instead of the elevator.
- Put on music and dance in your living room!





30 Winter Street, Boston, MA 02108

Toll-Free: 866.610.2273 (TTY 711)

Fax: 617.830.0534

8am to 8pm, 7 days a week

www.commonwealthcarealliance.org