

Tips on Avoiding Caregiver Burnout

Caregiving is a thoughtful, necessary, and selfless act of kindness shared by as many as 54 million Americans. The reality is, as you well know, caregiving is hard work- maybe the hardest work!

You might be giving care to another person who is either ill, working through a rehabilitation program, or maybe an elderly parent needing help with activities of daily living. Odds are, you are giving this care in addition to outside employment, caring for your immediate family, or both. Issues, with which you have little or no prior experience, such as treatment for pressure sores, giving someone a bedbath, or assisting with mobility problems, are now realities and you are expected to handle it all. The demands on your body, mind, emotions and soul can easily seem overwhelming.

Providing care to someone else can be exhausting, unrelenting, sometimes mind-numbing, and can be thankless. The result, all too often, is that family caregivers have little or no time for themselves and the activities they enjoy, and their relationships with friends and family suffer. Feelings of helplessness, guilt, exasperation and depression are common among family caregivers, as are sleep deprivation, fatigue and fantasies of escape. Managing the contradictions, avoiding the stress, and forestalling an early burnout are the challenges we face as caregivers. However, it is a challenge you can meet and conquer, with a little planning and a lot of support.

Just what is Caregiver Burnout?

"Burnout" refers to feeling as though you have "nothing left." You can't give anything else to another because you feel you have nothing left to give. This could be either emotionally, physically, mentally or spiritually (or all of the above), you feel drained. However, "burnout's" definition is entirely subjective and perhaps, not a term that best describes your state. So, the more important question is, "What are you or are you not feeling as a caregiver?"

Signs of Caregiver Burnout

Irritability - You snap at people for small things; you lose patience easily.

Withdrawal - You don't stay in touch with friends and activities like you used to.

Fatigue - You are constantly tired and exhausted.

Insomnia - You have a hard time getting to sleep, staying asleep, or sleep restlessly.

Apathy - You feel numb and must force yourself to do routine caregiver tasks.

Appetite - Changes. You eat more than you used to, or don't feel like eating anything.

Increased Substance Use - The only relief you can get is from alcohol, drugs, or smoking.

Feelings of Guilt - You think you are not doing enough, or you feel resentment for the amount of work doing

Even this list of emotions may be only a small fraction of what you are experiencing. In the information that follows, we will refer to specific physical, mental, emotional/spiritual, and practical concerns. However, if the above list really hits the mark on what you are feeling, you may be experiencing depression. Consider a visit to your doctor for a general checkup or a

counselor/therapist for specific concerns, a religious representative from your community of faith, or a support group, etc. The point is, sometimes we need help from the "professional" community to help bolster our emotional and physical well-being that is needed in caregiving.

What Causes Caregiver Burnout?

Caregivers often are so busy caring for others that they tend to neglect their own emotional, physical, and spiritual health. The demands on a caregiver's body, mind, and emotions can easily seem overwhelming, leading to fatigue and hopelessness -- and, ultimately, burnout. Other factors that can lead to caregiver burnout include:

Your family's needs require more of your time right now and there is only so much time you can divide between caregiving and other responsibilities.

Financial resources are a concern and you are really unsure of costs for assisted living centers, nursing homes, etc.

So much is going on in your life right now, you just try to cope from one minute to the next.

Although you have siblings who could pitch in and help with the caregiving, you are the one doing everything.

You begin thinking about all of your other concerns as soon as your head hits the pillow.

Stress, anxiety, and fear seem to be a constant in your life right now.

Although you may be "on the run" all day, you really don't get the time to exercise.

How Can I Prevent Burnout?

Here are some steps you can take to help prevent caregiver burnout:

Find someone you trust; such as a family member, friend, co-worker, or neighbor to talk to about your feelings and frustrations.

Set realistic goals, accept that you may need help with caregiving, and turn to others for help with some tasks. Contact your Area Agency on Aging, home care agencies and local County/Commission of Aging for assistance.

Don't forget about yourself because you're too busy caring for someone else. Set aside time for yourself, even if it's just an hour or two. Remember, taking care of yourself is not a luxury, it is an absolute necessity for caregivers.

Be realistic about your loved one's disease, especially if it is a progressive disease such as Parkinson's or Alzheimer's.

Talk to a professional. Most therapists, social workers, and clergy members are trained to counsel individuals dealing with a wide range of physical and emotional issues.

Know your limits and do a "reality-check" of your personal situation. Recognize and accept your potential for caregiver burnout. Seek out help!

Take advantage of respite care services. Respite care provides a temporary break for caregivers. This can range from a few hours of in-home care to a short stay in a nursing home or assisted living facility.

Educate yourself. The more you know about the illness, the more effective you will be in caring for the person with the illness. Talk with your loved one's physician for advice. The internet has a wealth of information at your disposal.

Accept your feelings. Having negative feelings; such as frustration or anger and about your responsibilities or the person for whom you are caring is normal. It does not mean you are a bad person or a bad caregiver.

Stay healthy by eating right and getting plenty of exercise and sleep.

Develop new tools for coping. Remember to lighten up and accentuate the positive. Use humor to help deal with everyday stresses.

Join a caregiver support group. Sharing your feelings and experiences with others in the same situation can help you manage stress, locate helpful resources, and reduce feelings of frustration and isolation.

Final Closing Thoughts

Be gentle with yourself and know that you are not alone. Help is there for you.

Those "time-outs" can help replenish our physical/mental and spiritual resources.

Remember you can't give what you don't have!

***Believe in Yourself.
Protect Your Health.
Reach Out for Help.***