

Coping with Caregiver Stress & Burnout

As the population ages, more caregiving is provided by people who are not health care professionals. Approximately one-third of adults in the United States provide care to other adults as unpaid caregivers.

The demands of caring for an elderly parent or an aging spouse can result in a great deal of stress – especially if you feel like you are in over your head. If caregivers aren't careful, they can jeopardize their own health and well-being.

Still, there are steps you can take to limit stress and reclaim a sense of balance, joy, and hope in your life.

What is Caregiver Burnout?

Caregiving can be a rewarding experience, but it is often a long-term job, and the physical, emotional, and psychological impact can snowball over time. You may face months, years, or even decades of caregiving responsibilities. This can be especially disheartening when there's no hope that your loved one's condition will improve.

When caregiver stress is left unchecked, it can take a toll — eventually leading to burnout, a state of emotional, mental, and physical exhaustion.

By learning to recognize the signs of caregiver stress and burnout, you can take action to prevent things from becoming worse. Here are a few red flags to watch for:

Common Signs of Caregiver Stress:

- Anxiety, depression, or irritability
- Feeling tired and run down
- Problems sleeping
- Overreacting to minor nuisances
- New or worsening health challenges
- Difficulty staying focused
- Feeling increasingly resentful
- Drinking, smoking, or overeating
- Neglecting personal responsibilities.

Common Signs of Caregiver Burnout:

- You have less energy than you once had
- You seem to catch every cold or flu going around
- You are always worn out, no matter how much sleep you manage to get
- You neglect your own needs, either because you are too busy, or you don't care anymore
- Your life revolves around caregiving, but it gives you little satisfaction
- You struggle to relax when given the opportunity
- You are increasingly irritated or impatient with the person you are caring for or others
- You feel hopeless or depressed.

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Tips to Avoid Caregiver Stress & Burnout

While caring for a loved one will never be stress-free, these tips can help you avoid the symptoms of caregiver burnout and find more balance in your life.

Practice Acceptance

When faced with the burden of caregiving, you may feel the need to make sense of the situation and ask, “Why?” You can spend a tremendous amount of energy dwelling on things you can’t change and for which there are no clear answers. Aim to avoid the emotional trap of feeling sorry for yourself or searching for someone to blame. Acknowledge that having negative feelings – such as frustration or anger – about your responsibilities or the person for whom you are caring is normal. It does not mean you are a bad person or caregiver.

Look into Respite Care

Respite care provides short-term relief for primary caregivers. It can be arranged for just an afternoon or for several days or weeks. Respite care can be provided at home, in a healthcare facility, or at an adult day center. Medicare will cover most of the cost of up to 5 days in a row of respite care in a hospital or skilled nursing facility for a person receiving hospice care. Medicaid also may offer assistance. The ARCH National Respite Network offers a [Respite Locator](#) to help you find respite services in your area.

Look for the Silver Lining

Stop and think about the ways caregiving has made you stronger, or how your relationship with the person you are caring for has grown. Concentrate on the positive reasons behind your choice to become a caregiver. Perhaps you do it to repay your parent for the care they gave you growing up, or maybe it’s because of the example you want to set for your children. Remembering your motivations can help sustain you through difficult times.

Speak Up

Don’t expect family members to know what you need or how you’re feeling. Be transparent about what is going on and start a dialogue. If you have concerns or thoughts about how to improve the situation, express them, even if you are unsure of how they’ll be received. Aim to get as many family members involved in the care of your loved one as possible and divide up caregiving tasks. Even someone who lives far away can help. One person can take care of medical responsibilities, another with finances and bills, and another with groceries and errands, for example.

Say “Yes” to Help

Do not be shy about accepting assistance from others. Make a list of small tasks that others can help you with, and let the helper choose what they feel comfortable doing. For instance, a friend may offer to take the person you care for on a walk a couple of times a week, or maybe they can pick up groceries for you.

Make Use of Available Resources

Seniors might be eligible for low- or no-cost services, such as visiting nurses, in-home medical care, meal delivery, and adult day programs. This network of support can help alleviate caregiver stress. Check out the [National Council on Aging’s \(NCOA\) BenefitsCheckUp](#). This free online screening tool can help older adults and caregivers to search for many of these benefits in their area.

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Learn to Set Boundaries

You are human, and you cannot be everything to everybody. Say “no” to requests that are draining and stressful, such as hosting or planning a family event.

Find an Outlet to Seek Advice or Just Vent

Sometimes it’s nice to just talk to someone who understands what you are going through. There are a plethora of in-person groups and online communities of caregivers who can offer advice and support when you need it the most. These groups are a safe space for you to vent or work through issues that will inevitably come up. [AgingCare has an online forum](#) where you can ask questions or read through past posts and discussions.

Take Care of Your Own Health

Most people don’t enter into caring for a spouse or family member thinking that they might be putting their own health at risk. But those who provide care for a loved one tend to experience high chronic stress and skimp on self-care – factors that raise the risk for many illnesses. Do not skip your own doctor’s appointments because you’re too busy. Exercise, eat well, and get enough sleep. Tell your physician that you are a caregiver and bring up any health concerns you may have. Remember, taking care of yourself is not a luxury. It is an absolute necessity for caregivers.

Caregiver burnout happens when the stress and burden of caring for a loved one becomes overwhelming. Burnout is common in caretakers — you didn’t do anything to cause it. The most important thing is to know the warning signs of caregiver burnout so you can recognize and even prevent them. Following the tips for preventing burnout and using the many resources available to caretakers will help you get to a healthier place.