



Mind: Managing Caregiver Stress

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Managing Caregiver Stress



Caregiving for loved ones can be both tough and transformational. Managed well, caregivers report that the opportunity to give back contributed to a sense of personal growth, meaning and purpose, strengthened the relationship with the care recipient, and provided comfort in knowing that their loved one was receiving attentive and compassionate care.

And yet—we hear the warnings of caregiver stress and burnout. Indeed, much has been written about the toll it can take on our physical, emotional, and mental health, with collateral impacts on our family life, work demands, and personal self-care. Manifestations of stress and burnout include reduced sleep and increased exhaustion, depression, feelings of anger, frustration and guilt, irritability, difficulty concentrating, lower immune response and susceptibility to colds and flu. It is not unusual for caregivers to operate in a sense of denial, believing that they are handling it well and are able to continue to sprint this marathon...until they can't.

I can relate to all of these issues – especially the denial! I remember well working full time, and with my brothers, providing support and care while our parents were in and out of hospitals, with time spent in intensive care units and on life support for periods of time. Then came their release from hospital and need for ongoing home care without the benefit of 24/7 nursing care in a hospital. “I’m fine – I’m doing ok,” was the typical response to folks asking how it is going. In hindsight, I can see that I was not fine. Although I put on my ‘taking care of business hat,’ I was exhausted, scared, and feeling that no matter what we did, events were unfolding outside of our control. It is no surprise that one day I looked into the mirror to see that half of my face was frozen in a wide-eyed startled expression with a case of Bell’s Palsy. Luckily, the paralysis eventually resolved itself, and the residual permanent numbness in sections of my face is a constant reminder to pay attention to the warning signs and appreciate the importance of better self-care.

Self-care is a noble platitude – but not typically that easy to apply. Here are some tips that can help make the journey serve you as a caregiver as well as your cherished care receiver.

- Put the oxygen mask on yourself first! Get regular sleep, keep up your good nutritional habits, and do some form of exercise each day. Even a short walk down the street can



provide the so needed mental and physical reset and recharge.

- Give yourself permission for a break. Read a book, take a luxurious bath, or go to a movie with a friend.
- You probably have some important relationships you have put on temporary hold – reach out and re-connect, even if it is only for a few minutes.
- Find a way to laugh out loud! Watch that crazy comedy that makes you chuckle or google funny animal videos on YouTube. Ask your friends to send comical and whimsical links to brighten each day. You can share these with your loved ones you are caring for – everyone is uplifted with a laugh shared.
- Ask a friend, family member or perhaps a colleague to research support services in your community with details and contact numbers. Make sure the list also includes options for respite care that can allow you to get away for longer periods of time for a fuller re-charge.
- Join a support caregivers group. Imagine spending time with folks who know exactly what you are going through – where they can likely finish a sentence for you in a spirit of unconditional rapport and compassion. You will receive practical and relevant tips and suggestions from others navigating the same rough waters.
- Most of all – be kind to yourself. You will have feelings of guilt, frustration, and anger

over the situation – that is normal. No matter how much you do and give, it often never feels enough. Appreciate the whole of you. What you may think of as the good, bad, and the ugly, is probably just a rich expression of your full humanity.

As we said at the beginning of this article, caregiving can be both tough and transformational. Some of my most cherished memories with my parents and family were the intimate times of giving, sharing, and receiving. The love, laughter and even the fear, tears, and sadness. I am grateful for the honour to have walked that path, and perhaps next time I can do so without offending my face!

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When Stress is Good

This edition addressed the need to mitigate long-term and prolonged stress. However –brief bouts of episodic stress can offer some positive outcomes. Short-term stress can stimulate creativity, boost your brain power, increase strength of your muscles, motivate you, and improve your short-range immunity.

Life Experiences

“Simply let experience take place very freely, so that your open heart is suffused with the tenderness of true compassion.”

Tsoknyi Rinpoche