

# Care for the Caregiver

**B**eing a caregiver for someone with a serious illness or chronic condition isn't easy. There are a multitude of demands on your time, energy, and resources. Between doctors' appointments, dispensing medication, helping the ill person complete daily tasks, managing the household, providing meals and more, it's all too easy to feel overburdened, overstressed, and overwhelmed.

Caregiving expert and author Walter St. John, EdD, says it's critical for caregivers to develop healthy and habitual coping mechanisms. St. John shares ten healthy ways for caregivers to effectively cope with stress.

**Have realistic expectations.** When many people take on caregiving roles, they have unrealistic expectations regarding how much they'll be able to do, what their relationship with the ill person will be like, and what type of attitude they'll have. When reality doesn't match these ideals, negativity, conflict, stress, and disappointment can result. Don't set your self-expectations too high.

**Learn to accept what you cannot change.** Know your mental and physical limits, and when to step back to recharge your batteries.

**Obtain advice from experienced caregivers.** As a caregiver, you're faced with new information to learn, adjustments to your daily routine, and important responsibilities. The good news is you're not alone. Others have been where you are today.

Sources for guidance include friends or relatives who have acted as caregivers, the ill person's medical team, clergy, social workers specializing in caregiving, and nursing home professional staff. Look for caregiver support groups in your area and online.

**Accept that you need help.** Set boundaries regarding what caregiving tasks you can and can't do, what resources you can and can't provide, and how much time and energy you have available. One person can't do it all; in fact, you should try to have at least two other people to help you. Tell family and friends what you need and how they can assist you.

If you foresee your team of helpers becoming stretched thin, consider taking the ill person to a daycare center several times a week. There is no shame—and a lot of good sense—in sharing the caregiving duties and responsibilities as much as

is possible and practical.

**Control the caregiving situation.** Even though you've volunteered to take care of someone else's needs, you're not at the mercy of the ill person. You have the right to make yourself understood, to ensure that your own needs are being met, and to protect yourself from excessive stress, physical and mental strain, and even abuse.

Of course, there will be some non-negotiables (for instance, medication might need to be taken at a certain time each day no matter what), but other aspects of your responsibilities and routine will be up for negotiation. Set ground rules of conduct when your caregiving begins.

**Live your own life.** When some people become caregivers, they push the "pause" button on their own lives. They stop spending time with their own friends and family, cease to participate in hobbies, and rearrange their schedules.

Do your best to balance your previous life activities and routines with the newer demands of caregiving. Decide what's important—whether that's your family, your job, or other pursuit—and focus on these priorities so that you don't come to resent your role, and possibly even the ill person. Ask a trusted friend or relative to help you stay focused on the big picture.

**Insist on private time each day.** Time to yourself may suddenly become a luxury. Many caregivers find that there are more than enough tasks to keep them busy during every waking moment of the day. But for the sake of your own mental, emotional, and even physical health, it's crucial that you set aside time to take care of your own needs and desires.

Share your personal time requirements and include them in your routine at the outset of taking on caregiving responsibilities. It's essential to have something to look forward to at the end of each day or week.

**Keep mentally and physically fit.** You'll be best equipped for the demands of caregiving if you maintain your mental and physical health. It may sound like common sense, but it's easy to neglect the basics. Eat balanced, nutritious, stress-free meals at about the same time each day; get adequate sleep on a regular basis; take several brief rest periods daily; see your doctor promptly when you need to; schedule periodic



medical examinations; beware of too much self-medication; and get lots of exercise regularly.

**Learn to say no.** If you're around someone who's ill, demands will be made of you. Especially if you're a caregiver, you're agreeing to do things the sick person can't handle himself. But you can't say yes to everything. While you may be the "healthy one," you still have physical and mental limits. Encourage the ill person. Give them the guidance and resources to do as many things as they can without overdoing it. Try to identify what your loved one can handle without becoming overwhelmed and exhausted (some examples might include paying bills, folding laundry while seated, and sorting medication), and then encourage the person to take on these jobs. You'll be helping both yourself and allowing the ill person to maintain some control over their life.

**Have a plan for stressful times.** Caregiving is stressful. Some days you may become frustrated because the ill person is angry and rude (when this happens, keep in mind that seriously ill people have a lot to feel upset about); other days, the constant demands of caregiving might weigh heavily enough that you reach the end of your rope.

Do what's necessary to remain cool and collected, even if you have to pause for a few seconds or leave the room. You can't always control the ill person's behavior, but you can control your own response.

The bottom line is, you need to take care of yourself first if you want to effectively care for the ill person. Sacrificing yourself unnecessarily doesn't do anyone any good. It's OK—even encouraged—to spend time on yourself. ■

Information for this handout was derived from: St. John, W., *Solace: How Caregivers and Others Can Relate, Listen, and Respond Effectively to a Chronically Ill Person* (Bull Publishing Company, 2011).