



### **PPRS Training on Caring for Yourself**

A Pikes Peak Respite Services (PPRS) providers need to take care of themselves. After successfully completing the PPRS Training on Caring for Yourself, you should be able to identify how to take responsibility for your own care, reduce your personal stress, set goals, seek solutions, communicate constructively, ask for an accept help, and learn from your emotions. At PPRS consult with Beverly Seemann if you are feeling overwhelmed or need assistance with caring for yourself so you are able to complete your job.

### **Effects of Caregiving on Health and Well Being**

Researchers know a lot about the effects of caregiving on health and well being. The combination of prolonged stress, the physical demands of caregiving, and the biological vulnerabilities that come with age place you at risk for significant health problems if you don't learn to care for yourself early on in your career. But despite these risks, family caregivers of any age are less likely than non-caregivers to practice preventive healthcare and self-care behavior. Regardless of age, sex, and race and ethnicity, caregivers report problems attending to their own health and well-being while managing caregiving responsibilities.

Caregivers report:

- sleep deprivation
- poor eating habits
- failure to exercise
- failure to stay in bed when ill
- postponement of or failure to make medical appointments.
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- **Identifying Personal Barriers**

Many times, attitudes and beliefs form personal barriers that stand in the way of caring for yourself. Not taking care of yourself may be a lifelong pattern, with taking care of others an easier option. However, as a PPRS caregiver you must ask yourself, "What good will I be to the person I care for if I become ill? The first task in removing personal barriers to self-care is to identify what is in your way. For example,

- Do you feel you have to prove that you are worthy of the care recipient's affection?
- Do you think you are being selfish if you put your needs first?
- Is it frightening to think of your own needs? What is the fear about?
- Do you have trouble asking for what you need? Do you feel inadequate if you ask for help? Why?

Sometimes caregivers have misconceptions that increase their stress and get in the way of good self-care. Here are some of the most commonly expressed:

- I am responsible for everyone's health that is in my care
- If I don't do it, no one will.
- If I do it right, I will get the love, attention, and respect I deserve.

***Try positive statements: "I'm good at giving John a bath." "I can exercise for 15 minutes a day." Remember, your mind believes what you tell it.***

Because we base our behavior on our thoughts and beliefs, attitudes and misconceptions like those noted above can cause caregivers to continually attempt to do what cannot be done, to control what cannot be controlled. Ask yourself what might be getting in your way and keeping you from taking care of yourself.

### **Reducing Personal Stress**

How we perceive and respond to an event is a significant factor in how we adjust and cope with it. The stress you feel is not only the result of your caregiving situation but also the result of your perception of it—whether you see the glass as half-full or half-empty. It is important to remember that you are not alone in your experiences.

Your level of stress is influenced by many factors, including the following:

- Your coping abilities. How you coped with stress in the past predicts how you will cope now. Identify your current coping strengths so that you can build on them.
- Your caregiving situation. Some caregiving situations are more stressful than others. For example, caring for a person with dementia is often more stressful than caring for someone with a physical limitation.

#### **Steps to Managing Stress**

1. *Recognize warning signs early.* These might include irritability, sleep problems, and forgetfulness. Know your own warning signs, and act to make changes. Don't wait until you are overwhelmed.
2. *Identify sources of stress.* Ask yourself, "What is causing stress for me?" Sources of stress might be too much to do, family disagreements, feelings of inadequacy, inability to say no.
3. *Identify what you can and cannot change.* Remember, we can only change ourselves; we cannot change another person. When you try to change things over which you have no control, you will only increase your sense of frustration. Ask yourself, "What do I have some control over? What can I change?" Even a small change can make a big difference. The challenge we face as caregivers is well expressed in words from the Serenity Prayer:  
*...Grant me the serenity to  
 Accept the things I cannot change,  
 Courage to change the things I can,  
 And the wisdom to know the difference.*
4. *Take action.* Taking some action to reduce stress gives us back a sense of control. Stress reducers can be simple activities like walking and other forms of exercise, gardening, meditation, having coffee with a friend. Identify some stress reducers that work for you.

### **Setting Goals**

Setting goals or deciding what you would like to accomplish in the next three to six months is an important tool for taking care of yourself. Here are some sample goals you might set:

- Take a break from caregiving.
- Get help with caregiving tasks like bathing and preparing meals.
- Feel more healthy.

Goals are generally too big to work on all at once. We are more likely to reach a goal if we break it down into smaller action steps. Once you've set a goal, ask yourself, "What steps do I take to reach my goal?" Make an action plan by deciding which step you will take first, and when. Then get started!

### Goal and Action Steps

*Goal:* Feel more healthy.

*Possible action steps:*

1. Make an appointment for a physical check-up.
2. Take a half-hour break once during the week.
3. Walk three times a week for 10 minutes.

### Seeking Solutions

Seeking solutions to difficult situations is, of course, one of the most important tools in caregiving. Once you've identified a problem, taking action to solve it can change the situation and also change your attitude to a more positive one, giving you more confidence in your abilities.

### Steps for Seeking Solutions

1. *Identify the problem.* Look at the situation with an open mind. The real problem might not be what first comes to mind. For example, you think that the problem is simply that you are tired all the time, when the more basic difficulty is your belief that "no one can care for John like I can." The problem? Thinking that you have to do everything yourself.
2. *List possible solutions.* One idea is to try a different perspective: "Even though someone else provides help to John in a different way than I do, it can be just as good." Ask a friend to help. Call and ask about agencies in your area that could help provide care.
3. *Select one solution from the list.* Then try it!
4. *Evaluate the results.* Ask yourself how well your choice worked.
5. *Try a second solution.* If your first idea didn't work, select another. But don't give up on the first; sometimes an idea just needs fine tuning.
6. *Use other resources.* Ask friends, family members and professionals for suggestions.
7. *If nothing seems to help, accept that the problem may not be solvable now.* You can revisit it at another time.

**Note:** All too often, we jump from step one to step seven and then feel defeated and stuck. Concentrate on keeping an open mind while listing and experimenting with possible solutions.

### Communicating Constructively

Being able to communicate constructively is one of a caregiver's most important tools. When you communicate in ways that are clear, assertive and constructive, you will be heard and get the help and support you need. The box below shows basic guidelines for good communication.

### Communication Guidelines

- *Use "I" messages rather than "you" messages.* Saying "I feel angry" rather than "You made me angry" enables you to express your feelings without blaming others or causing them to become defensive.
- *Respect the rights and feelings of others.* Do not say something that will violate another person's rights or intentionally hurt the person's feelings. Recognize that the other person has the right to express feelings.
- *Be clear and specific.* Speak directly to the person. Don't hint or hope the person will guess what you need. Other people are not mind readers. When you speak directly about what you need or feel, you are taking the risk that the other person might disagree or say no to your request, but that action also shows respect for the other person's opinion. When both parties speak directly, the chances of reaching understanding are greater.
- *Be a good listener.* Listening is the most important aspect of communication.

How can you communicate effectively with your boss about scheduling?

How can you communicate effectively with your co-workers if you need a shift covered?

### **Asking for and Accepting Help**

When people have asked if they can be of help to you, how often have you replied, "Thank you, but I'm fine." Many caregivers don't know how to marshal the goodwill of others and are reluctant to ask for help. You may not wish to "burden" others or admit that you can't handle everything yourself.

Be prepared with a mental list of ways that others could help you. For example, someone could take the person you care for on a 15-minute walk a couple of times a week. Your neighbor could pick up a few things for you at the grocery store. A relative could fill out some insurance papers. When you break down the jobs into very simple tasks, it is easier for people to help. And they do want to help. It is up to you to tell them how.

### **Starting to Exercise**

You may be reluctant to start exercising, even though you've heard it's one of the healthiest things you can do. Perhaps you think that physical exercise might harm you or that it is only for people who are young and able to do things like jogging. Fortunately, research suggests that you can maintain or at least partly restore endurance, balance, strength and flexibility through everyday physical activities like walking and gardening. Even household chores can improve your health. The key is to increase your physical activity by exercising and using your own muscle power.

Exercise promotes better sleep, reduces tension and depression, and increases energy and alertness. If finding time for exercise is a problem, incorporate it into your daily activity. Perhaps the care recipient can walk or do stretching exercise with you. If necessary, do frequent short exercises instead of those that require large blocks of time. Find activities you enjoy.

Walking, one of the best and easiest exercises, is a great way to get started. Besides its physical benefits, walking helps to reduce psychological tension. Walking 20 minutes a day, three times a week, is very beneficial. If you can't get away for that long, try to walk for as long as you can on however many days you can. Work walking into your life. Walk around the mall, to the store or a nearby park. Walk around the block with a friend.

### **Learning from Our Emotions**

It is a strength to recognize when your emotions are controlling you (instead of you controlling your emotions). Our emotions are messages we need to listen to. They exist for a reason. However negative or painful, our feelings are useful tools for understanding what is happening to us.

Caregiving often involves a range of emotions. Some feelings are more comfortable than others. When you find that your emotions are intense, they might mean the following:

- That you need to make a change in your caregiving situation.
- That you are grieving a loss.
- That you are experiencing increased stress.

- That you need to be assertive and ask for what you need.

### Summing Up

Remember, it is not selfish to focus on your own needs and desires when you are a caregiver—it's an important part of the job. You are responsible for your own self-care. Focus on the following self-care practices:

- Learn and use stress-reduction techniques.
- Attend to your own healthcare needs.
- Get proper rest and nutrition.
- Exercise regularly.
- Take time off without feeling guilty.
- Participate in pleasant, nurturing activities.
- Seek and accept the support of others.
- Seek supportive counseling when you need it, or talk to a trusted counselor or friend.
- Identify and acknowledge your feelings.
- Change the negative ways you view situations.
- Set goals.

It's up to you! Only when we first help ourselves can we effectively help others. Caring for yourself is one of the most important—and one of the most often forgotten—things you can do as a caregiver. When *your* needs are taken care of, the person you care for will benefit, too.