

Caregiving

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If you're caring for an aging parent, disabled child or facing the challenges of assisting a loved one who is chronically ill, disabled or elderly, you are not alone. You are one of the 22 million Americans who give of themselves to care for the life of another. Caregivers provide 80 percent of in-home care to extended family members, but unlike nurses and home health-aids, they are unpaid for their expertise. Caregivers are dedicated, compassionate individuals that volunteer their labor of love. As a caregiver, your job is a vital role in the life of your loved one. Often times, it is also a role that can be overwhelming, exhausting, emotional and sometimes thankless. "Caregiving is a difficult job that can take a toll on relationships, jobs, and emotional well-being," says Dr. Elizabeth Clark, executive director of the National Association of Social Workers. "Those who care for others need to be sure to take care of themselves, as well."

This can often feel like a request that is easier said than done, especially when you spend so much time dedicated and focused on your loved one. However, it is important to realize that caregivers that are overstressed can be vulnerable to changes that can have a negative impact on their own health. Sometimes you must strategize and be creative in order to find ways to take care of yourself. But if you don't, you won't be able to care for anyone else. Think about the instructions that the flight attendant gives to the passengers when you board the plane. You must apply the oxygen mask to yourself before assisting another with their mask.



Caregivers need to be aware of the symptoms of caregiver stress. The following complaints are commonly reported to be experienced by individuals that are caregivers and can have a negative impact on their general health. If you or someone you know suffer from these, please encourage them to seek professional help. Increased anxiety, feelings of being overwhelmed, fatigue, episodes of insomnia or increased sleepiness, exhaustion – both mentally or physically, undesired weight changes (loss or gains), increased intolerance - easily irritated or angry, loss of interest in activities that you once enjoyed, feelings of sadness or depression, experiencing physical discomfort such as having frequent headaches, bodily pain or stomach discomfort, self-medicating with alcohol or drugs, including prescription medications.

Because of the emotional, mental and physical demands that a caregiver endures, it is important to take advantage of local community and state resources available that can assist you during this period of your life.

Here are some important tips for caregivers:

Don't Be Afraid to Ask For Help

We tend to wait until we are in a state of crisis before asking for help. Seek out the help of other family members, friends, neighbors or church and community members and enlist their assistance to help

care for your loved one. Most people would love help but they are not sure what you may need. Arrange for a sign-up sheet to provide meals, grocery shopping, transportation to the dr, laundry, lawn work and even times for companionship.

Get Connected

Find out about caregiving resources in your community. Many communities offer specific support groups and classes specifically about the disease your loved one has been diagnosed with. Community services such as transportation, meal delivery or housekeeping may also be available in your area. Join a support group. These groups can provide validation and encouragement, as well as problem-solving strategies for difficult situations. The people in support groups are experiencing similar experiences. They understand and can empathize with what you may be going through. This is often a place where meaningful friendships are created.

But as you make new friends, make an effort to stay well-connected with family and friends you already have. They too will offer nonjudgmental and emotional support. Make sure to set aside time each week for connecting, even if it's just a walk or a chat on the phone with a friend. Rather than struggling on your own, take advantage of local resources for caregivers. Contact the Eldercare Locator or contact your local Area Agency on Aging (AAA) to learn about services in your community. You can find your local AAA online.

Family Caregiver Alliance - <https://www.caregiver.org/>

Focus on what you are able to provide.

Guilt is a very normal emotion and chances are, you will not be able to do it all, even when you or your loved one thinks that you can. When you realize the expectations that have been thrust upon yourself may have been too much, you may begin to feel guilty that you cannot accomplish it all alone. But understand that there is no "perfect" caregiver. You must trust and believe that you are doing the very best that you can and that you are making the best decisions possible for your loved one. There are going to be good days and bad days. If you feel that you can not provide what your loved one needs, or meet the expectations you have placed on yourself, then seek help from another provider.

Set realistic goals and establish a routine

Plan for success by breaking large tasks into smaller steps that you can accomplish one at a time. Prioritize, make lists and establish a daily routine. Learn to say no and put an end to over extending yourself by declining requests that are draining or that add additional stress, such as hosting holiday meals, facilitating parties or taking on additional responsibilities at work.

It's Not Easy to Tell Your Parents What to Do

One of the most difficult things about caring for a parent is the day you have to tell them they need to have help, they can no longer drive or that they may have to move from their home. It is best to be proactive rather than reactive. Begin these discussions about long-term care wishes and desires before any decline occurs. Allow your loved one to be a part of the decision-making process and have the proper paperwork completed such as a Durable POA, Will and Health Care POA.

Take Care of You

It is not unusual to feel frustrated with your parents or children when they refuse your input and help. Seek a referral to a professional who can help you cope with your personal issues and frustrations. Set personal health goals. For example, set goals to establish a good sleep routine, find time to be physically active on most days of the week, eat a healthy diet and drink plenty of water.

Stay Informed

We live in a world of constant change. Medications and treatments are constantly changing and the only way to keep up-to-date is to stay informed with the latest news. Attend local caregiver workshops and conferences, participate in support groups, attend as many Dr. appointments as you can with your loved one, come prepared with a list of questions, current medication lists, and be prepared to take notes. Do research on medications, side effects, and available clinical trials.

Take Time Out

Caregivers who experience feelings of burnout need to accept that they may occasionally need a break from their loved one. This time away is necessary in order to continue providing him or her with the best care. If extended family members or friends are unavailable, look into local agencies, and assisted living facilities that provide respite care.

In-home respite - Health care aides come to your home to provide companionship, nursing services or both.

Adult day care centers - Centers that provide care for older adults during daytime hours. Usually 8 hours per day and 5 days per week.

Short-term nursing homes / Some assisted living homes/ memory care homes accept individuals needing care for short stays of respite, while caregivers are away.

Hire Help

If possible, delegate responsibilities to others and employ additional help. The most important thing is to find trustworthy people to provide assistance. Use recommended home care agencies, talk with friends about their experiences, gather recommendations from support group and interview professionals before making a final decision on the one whose services you are going to retain.

About Katrina



Katrina Kepf is an R.N. who has for years cared for seniors and the disabled. She is also CAPS (Certified Aging in Place Specialist) certified and a Realtor®. Katrina is the president of L.I.F.E. (Living Independently and Functionally in your Environment). L.I.F.E. (www.etnlife.com) provides home modification and relocation resources for seniors and the disabled in Knoxville, TN. Katrina can be reached at: katrina@etnlife.com.