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Dual Roles: Healthcare Professional and Family Caregiver

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Are you balancing your work responsibilities with family caregiving? Do you spend your days off at doctors' appointments, coordinating medical care, or perhaps providing hands-on care for an ill or injured family member?

I led a retreat for caregivers a few years ago; 25% of the attendees were both professional and family caregivers, and they were all women. There seems to be an unwritten rule. If you work in healthcare, you are therefore the primary caregiver for your extended family. Everyone presumes that you are able to handle your entire family's medical needs.

This dual role of professional and family caregiver is a formula for compassion fatigue. Returning home from a long shift to find urgent messages from family, or perhaps receiving those calls on your mobile phone while you are trying to work, can be a strain even if all they need is information about a symptom or a referral to a healthcare provider. Far greater is the strain when a healthcare professional is the hands-on caregiver for a severely ill or injured family member. With no end in sight, chronic stress often plagues a healthcare professional whose family member is chronically impaired, either physically, cognitively, or emotionally.

I speak with experience about these matters. My personal situation changed dramatically when I became the primary caregiver for my husband before and after open-heart surgery. At the same time, our two Labrador Retrievers, Rosie and Daisy, our 'girls,' were diagnosed with different forms of cancer.

From our experiences, I learned some essentials and gained a little wisdom to help manage the dual responsibilities of being a healthcare professional, and family caregiver.

Take care of yourself. If you don't, you won't be able to care for your family. Exercise when time permits. Eat well, sleep when you can, quiet your mind, and renew your spirit. If you only have a few seconds to yourself, at least take a deep breath.

Don't worry. Remember these inspiring words: "God grant me the courage to change the things I can, the patience to accept those things I cannot, and the wisdom to know the difference." Release your worries over things outside of your control with prayer, meditation, affirmations, journaling, or counseling. Find an outlet that works for you.

Learn how to ask for help; it is a survival skill both at work and at home. When anyone says, "Can I help?" be ready with a resounding yes. Keep a mental list of items that

someone else can take care of for you. Meals? Childcare? Errands? A sit with the patient so that you can get out of the house for even a half an hour?

Delegate. Are your family members leaving all the work to you? No wonder; they view you as the competent, capable one! Delegate what you can, given each family member's abilities, resources, and emotional status. Don't wait for family members to offer. When appropriate, give them choices.

Prevent infection. Severely ill or injured family members rarely have a strong immune system. My husband's surgeon described his new aortic valve as a "germ magnet" until the tissue grew over the implant. This gave me added impetus to take care of myself. I could keep sick friends and family members away, but what if I got sick?

Enjoy your time together. When my husband was ill, one of my friends emailed me saying, "I think the greatest gift is the time together." I asked myself, "Is she for real?" Frankly, I was not enjoying myself. I barely had the time and energy to meet our basic needs. Her email caused me to pause. Could this caregiving time be quality time? The shift in attitude, from "I have so much to do" to "I have so much time with my beloved husband" was profound.

Be present. The greatest gift you can give loved ones is yourself. Open your heart, and focus on who you are with, instead of what you have to do.

Learn the difference between healing and curing. With curing, nothing but optimum recovery and survival is seen as success. In healing, even death can be a successful outcome of caring. Fortunately, husband completely recovered from surgery. However, both of our dogs passed on. Where is the success? Both passed away at home, with family and in their favorite surroundings. My faith convinces me they are now happy and comfortable in their new existence, whatever that may be. That is healing.

Allow yourself the time and opportunity to grieve. Sooth yourself in any way you can. Listen to music, get outside into nature, be with friends, pray, meditate, or exercise. Find the time and take the opportunity.

Above all, remember the most of simple truths: You are amazing. Care for yourself first; it will allow you to be the professional and family caregiver you want to be.