



The Pandemic Is Tough on Caregivers

This post was authored by [Margaret A. Graham, Esq.](#), of [Pregenzer, Baysinger, Wideman & Sale, PC](#), Albuquerque, New Mexico. She focuses her practice on special needs and elder law, and is caregiver to a child with special needs.

Caregiving is hard work, even in normal times. During the pandemic, stress levels can soar. With kids doing schoolwork online, parents have added “teacher” and “tech support” to their list of duties. They may also be attending Zoom meetings for a job they’re performing remotely.

If you feel overwhelmed, you’re not alone. For your own well-being—and your family’s—it’s important to step back, take stock, and care for yourself. Taking care of yourself is not letting your family down, it is not a sign of weakness, and it is not an act of selfishness. Caregivers can’t provide care effectively to their loved ones if they do not also take care of themselves.

Symptoms to Monitor

Caregivers have a tendency to place unrealistic demands on themselves. They may feel that they can never do “enough.” A relentless pace, with little downtime, can lead to severe anxiety, turbulent emotions, fatigue and depression. They become mentally and physically exhausted which, ironically, can render them less effective in caring for their loved ones. If you find yourself with any of these or similar feelings, know that it is okay to take a step back and evaluate what needs to be done versus what you might want to be done. Try to let go of some of what you would like to do and focus on what you need to do.

Moderation

If you begin to feel burned out, try to be objective. If a close friend were in your shoes, would you hold them to the same standard you’ve been setting for yourself? This is a challenging time for everyone. There are many things you can’t control, so don’t try to be superhuman. Recognize that you’re doing your best and that your best is enough.

Outreach

Share the responsibility. Can you delegate some of the cooking, housework and caregiving to other family members? Individuals with special needs can feel reassured when they realize that there are a number of people focused on their daily well-being. The old saying that “it takes a village” is even more relevant when it comes to caregiving. Other family members and friends may be very happy to help out, but first they need to know that you

need their help. Don't be afraid to ask. It takes some of the burden off you, allows family members and friends to have some of their own special time and memories with your loved one, and lets your loved one know that they have a "village" of people who love them.

Consider reaching out to a caregiver support group. During the pandemic, support group sessions are increasingly being held online. Other caregivers can offer helpful insights and an empathic ear. The National Alliance for Caregiving maintains a list of [support organizations](#), categorized by health condition.

Self-Care

You can't properly care for others if you neglect yourself. Pay attention to your health by eating properly, exercising and getting enough sleep. Taking short breaks throughout the day can help you decompress and stay focused. Listen to music, take a walk, read a chapter in that detective story on your bedside table. Even just a few minutes of deep breathing can make a difference. Remember, you are not being selfish by taking time for yourself. You need to be the best "you" possible to provide the care that your loved one needs.

Stay connected to friends and extended family by phone or video chat. Regular conversations with trusted individuals outside your household can give you additional perspective and a comforting sense of community. These connections don't need to be long or demanding. I regularly text silly puns with a friend to add a moment of laughter to my day and hers.

Accept that you'll sometimes have roiling emotions—including frustration, anger and resentment. "In tense moments, a solution can be as simple as counting to 10 to defuse a situation or walking away and taking a micro-break," says Joan M. Gillis, of McLean Hospital, Harvard Medical School's largest psychiatric teaching hospital. If you find yourself feeling this way, it is more important than ever to take time for yourself, reach out to a friend or caregiving group, or simply step away.

A Difficult Time

The pandemic is stretching all of us. Routines have been upended and uncertainty is at an all-time high. Each of us must stay flexible enough to adjust to the continuous change. Caregivers are a special category of "frontline" workers. Nurture yourself so you can better nurture others.

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