How Caregivers Can Take Care of Themselves

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Key Messages:

- Taking care of your own emotional health and physical needs makes you a more effective caregiver.
- Consider seeking assistance with caregiving responsibilities.
- Recognize signs of stress, and talk with your doctor or a counselor if you are having trouble coping with your emotions.

One of the most important?but often forgotten?tasks for caregivers is caring for themselves. A caregiver's physical, emotional, and mental health is vital to the well-being of the person who has cancer. To be a good caregiver, you must be good to yourself.

How to cope

Caregivers may experience periods of stress, anxiety, depression, and frustration. The following suggestions can help keep you from feeling overwhelmed or burned out.

Find support. Talking with other people who are caring for a family member or friend with cancer can help you cope with common feelings of anger, guilt, isolation, fear, sadness, or anticipatory grief. Ask an oncology social worker [2] if he or she can connect you with any local resources, such as support groups [3].

Recognize the signs of stress. Signs of stress may include feeling exhausted all of the time; getting sick more often than usual; not sleeping enough; feeling impatient, irritable, or forgetful; not enjoying the activities you used to enjoy; and withdrawing from people. If you find that you are constantly stressed, explore new ways to provide care [4] and seek help from others [5]. Learn more about managing stress [6].

Get help [4]. This can mean hiring people to care for the person with cancer or hiring people to help you with chores, errands, or childcare, which can free up some of your time. Family, friends, members of religious organizations, and people in community groups are often willing to assist. Accept their help and give them specific tasks.

Make time for yourself and other relationships. Although a person who has cancer may have many needs that require your attention, it is important for you to make time for yourself. Spending time doing something you enjoy can give you a much-needed break so you can continue to be an effective caregiver. It is also important to spend time with other people who are important to you so that you can maintain those supportive relationships.

Learn about the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA). If employed, take advantage of the Family and Medical Leave Act [7]. This act requires employers with 50 or more employees to provide up to 12 weeks of unpaid, job-protected leave for employees who need time off to care for a seriously ill family member. Employers are required to continue benefits during the leave period, and some may allow a flexible or reduced work schedule. The FMLA also permits employers to provide leave provisions that are more generous than the act requires. Talk with your employer to learn about the specific provisions your company offers.

Be kind and patient with yourself. Many caregivers experience occasional bouts of anger or frustration and then feel guilty for having these feelings. Try to find positive ways of coping with these difficult feelings, such as talking with supportive friends and exercising. Journaling [8] is another positive outlet.

Take care of your body. Make time to exercise, eat healthy foods, stay hydrated, and get enough sleep. In addition, re-evaluate your own health; the stress of caregiving can lead some people to develop or increase unhealthy habits, such as smoking, drinking too much alcohol, or using prescription medicine improperly. If you cannot make healthy behavior changes on your own, seek professional help.

When to seek professional help

It is important for caregivers to pay close attention to their emotional and mental health. Several studies have shown that caregivers are at an increased risk for depression and anxiety. If you are having trouble coping with your emotions, it is important for you to talk with your doctor or a counselor [9] immediately.

Depression symptoms

Symptoms of depression include feelings of sadness and despair that interfere with daily activities. Other warning signs include:

- Loss of appetite or overeating
- Problems sleeping (inability to sleep or oversleeping)
- Lack of energy
- Loss of interest in activities once enjoyed
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering, and making decisions
- Irritability and restlessness
- Excessive crying
- Headaches or constant, unexplained pains; physical symptoms that don?t improve with treatment
- Excessive use of alcohol

Anxiety symptoms

Anxiety is a common and normal response to a stressful situation, such as caring for a person with cancer. However, too much anxiety can lead to health problems and interfere with daily activities.

Symptoms of anxiety include:

- Difficulty solving problems, making decisions, or concentrating
- Feeling excitable or restless
- Increased muscle tension or feeling tense
- Headaches
- Unexplained and constant anger or irritability
- Inability to sleep
- Excessive worrying

Managing depression and anxiety

In addition to seeking professional help, other ways to help manage depression and anxiety include:

- Avoiding excessive use of alcohol
- Planning enjoyable activities with family and friends
- Joining a support group for caregivers
- Participating in activities that bring you happiness and comfort
- Exercising ? as little as 10 to 15 minutes at a time can help
- Practicing relaxation techniques, such as meditation and yoga

Keep in mind that taking care of your emotional health and physical needs makes you a more effective caregiver, which ultimately helps the person who is ill. Learn more about depression and anxiety [10].

More Information

Online Resources for Caregivers [11]

Coping With Guilt [12]

Online Communities for Support [13]

Caregiving [14]

Additional Resources

National Cancer Institute: Caring for the Caregiver [15]

Cancer*Care*: Caregiver Support Services [16]

Links:
[1] http://www.cancer.net/about-us
[2] http://www.cancer.net/node/24556
[3] http://www.cancer.net/node/25383
[4] http://www.cancer.net/node/25029
[5] http://www.cancer.net/node/25032
[6] http://www.cancer.net/node/24589
[7] http://www.dol.gov/dol/compliance/comp-fmla.htm
[8] http://www.cancer.net/node/24528
[9] http://www.cancer.net/node/24699
[10] http://www.cancer.net/node/25479
[11] http://www.cancer.net/node/25235

[12] http://www.cancer.net/node/24491
[13] http://www.cancer.net/node/24634
[14] http://www.cancer.net/node/25009
[15] http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/caring-for-the-caregiver
[16] http://www.cancercare.org/get_help/special_progs/caregivers.php