

CAREGIVER STRESS

While caring for a loved one can be very rewarding, it also involves many stressors. And since caregiving is often a long-term challenge, the emotional impact can snowball over time. You may face years or even decades of caregiving responsibilities. It can be particularly disheartening if you feel that you're in over your head, if there's no hope that your family member will get better, or if, despite your best efforts, their condition is gradually deteriorating.

If the stress of caregiving is left unchecked, it can take a toll on your health, relationships, and state of mind—eventually leading to burnout, a state of emotional, mental, and physical exhaustion. And when you get to that point, both you and the person you're caring for suffer.

That's why taking care of yourself isn't a luxury, it's a necessity. Cultivating your own emotional and physical well-being is just as important as making sure your family member gets to their doctor's appointment or takes their medication on time.

Signs of caregiver stress

As a caregiver, you may be so focused on your loved one that you don't realize that your own health and well-being are suffering. Watch for these signs of caregiver stress:

- Feeling overwhelmed or constantly worried
- Feeling tired often
- Getting too much sleep or not enough sleep
- Gaining or losing weight
- Becoming easily irritated or angry
- Losing interest in activities you used to enjoy
- Feeling sad
- Having frequent headaches, bodily pain or other physical problems
- Abusing alcohol or drugs, including prescription medications

Too much stress, especially over a long time, can harm your health. As a caregiver, you're more likely to experience symptoms of depression or anxiety. In addition, you may not get enough sleep or physical activity, or eat a balanced diet — which increases your risk of medical problems, such as heart disease and diabetes

Strategies for dealing with caregiver stress

The emotional and physical demands involved with caregiving can strain even the most resilient person. That's why it's so important to take advantage of the many resources and tools available to help you provide care for your loved one. Remember, if you don't take care of yourself, you won't be able to care for anyone else.

To help manage caregiver stress:

- **Accept help.** Be prepared with a list of ways that others can help you, and let the helper choose what he or she would like to do. For instance, a friend may offer to take the person you care for on a walk a couple of times a week. Or a friend or family member may be able to run an errand, pick up your groceries or cook for you.
- **Focus on what you can provide.** It's normal to feel guilty sometimes but understand that no one is a "perfect" caregiver. Believe that you are doing the best you can and making the best decisions you can at any given time.
- **Set realistic goals.** Break large tasks into smaller steps that you can do one at a time. Prioritize, make lists, and establish a daily routine. Begin to say no to requests that are draining, such as hosting holiday meals.
- **Get connected.** Find out about caregiving resources in your community. Many communities have classes specifically about the disease your loved one is facing. Caregiving services such as transportation, meal delivery or housekeeping may be available.
- **Join a support group.** A support group can provide validation and encouragement, as well as problem-solving strategies for difficult situations. People in support groups understand what you may be going through. A support group can also be a good place to create meaningful friendships.
- **Seek social support.** Try to stay well-connected with family and friends who can offer nonjudgmental emotional support. Set aside time each week for connecting, even if it's just a walk with a friend.
- **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.

References:

Mayo Clinic: <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/in-depth/caregiver-stress/art-20044784>

Help Guide: <https://www.helpguide.org/articles/stress/caregiver-stress-and-burnout.htm>