

First, Care for Yourself

On an airplane, an oxygen mask descends in front of you. What do you do? As we all know, the first rule is to put on your own oxygen mask before you assist anyone else. Only when we first help ourselves can we effectively help others. Caring for yourself is one of the most important—and one of the most often forgotten—things you can do as a caregiver. When your needs are taken care of, the person you care for will benefit, too.

For example, if you are a caregiving spouse between the ages of 66 and 96 and are experiencing mental or emotional strain, you have a risk of dying that is 63 percent higher than that of people your age who are not caregivers. The combination of loss, prolonged stress, the physical demands of caregiving, and the biological vulnerabilities that come with age place you at risk for significant health problems as well as an earlier death.

Taking Responsibility for Your Own Care

You cannot stop the impact of a chronic or progressive illness or a debilitating injury on someone for whom you care. But there is a great deal that you can do to take responsibility for your personal well-being and to get your own needs met.

Identifying Personal Barriers

Many times, attitudes and beliefs form personal barriers that stand in the way of caring for yourself. Not taking care of yourself may be a lifelong pattern, with taking care of others an easier option. However, as a family caregiver you must ask yourself, "What good will I be to the person I care for if I become ill? If I die? Breaking old patterns and overcoming obstacles is not an easy proposition, but it can be done—regardless of your age or situation. The first task in removing personal barriers to self-care is to identify what is in your way.

For example:

Do you think you are being selfish if you put your needs first?

- Is it frightening to think of your own needs? What is the fear about?
- Do you have trouble asking for what you need? Do you feel inadequate if you ask for help?
- Do you feel you have to prove that you are worthy of the care recipient's affection? Do you do too much as a result?

Sometimes caregivers have misconceptions that increase their stress and get in the way of good self-care. Here are some of the most commonly expressed:

- I am responsible for my parent's health.
- If I don't do it, no one will.
- If I do it right, I will get the love, attention, and respect I deserve.
- Our family always takes care of their own
- I promised my father I would always take care of my mother

Reducing Personal Stress

How we perceive and respond to an event is a significant factor in how we adjust and cope with

it. The stress you feel is not only the result of your caregiving situation but also the result of your perception of it—whether you see the glass as half-full or half-empty. It is important to remember that you are not alone in your experiences.

Your level of stress is influenced by many factors, including the following:

- Whether your caregiving is voluntary. If you feel you had no choice in taking on the responsibilities, the chances are greater that you will experience strain, distress, and resentment.
- Your relationship with the care recipient. Sometimes people care for another with the hope of healing a relationship. If healing does not occur, you may feel regret and discouragement.
- Your coping abilities. How you coped with stress in the past predicts how you will cope now. Identify your current coping strengths so that you can build on them.
- Your caregiving situation. Some caregiving situations are more stressful than others. For example, caring for a person with dementia is often more stressful than caring for someone with a physical limitation.
- Whether or not support is available.

Setting goals or deciding what you would like to accomplish in the next three to six months is an important tool for taking care of yourself. Here are some sample goals you might set:

- Take a break from caregiving.
- Get help with caregiving tasks like bathing and preparing meals.
- Engage in activities that will make you feel more healthy.

Goals are generally too big to work on all at once. We are more likely to reach a goal if we break it down into smaller action steps. Once you've set a goal, ask yourself, "What steps do I take to reach my goal?" Make an action plan by deciding which step you will take first, and when. Then get started!

Steps for Seeking Solutions

- Identify the problem. Look at the situation with an open mind. The real problem might not be what first comes to mind. For example, you think that the problem is simply that you are tired all the time, when the more basic difficulty is your belief that "no one can care for John like I can." The problem? Thinking that you have to do everything yourself.
- List possible solutions. One idea is to try a different perspective: "Even though someone else provides help to John in a different way than I do, it can be just as good." Ask a friend to help. Call Family Caregiver Alliance or the Eldercare Locator (see Resources List) and ask about agencies in your area that could help provide care.
- Select one solution from the list. Then try it!
- Evaluate the results. Ask yourself how well your choice worked.
- Try a second solution. If your first idea didn't work, select another. But don't give up on the first; sometimes an idea just needs fine tuning.
- Use other resources. Ask friends, family members and professionals for suggestions.
- If nothing seems to help, accept that the problem may not be solvable now. You can revisit it at another time.