

American Brain Tumor Association

# Care for the Caregiver

Being a caregiver to a family member can be one of the most challenging, but rewarding experiences a person can have. It can also be frustrating, lonely and overwhelming. The focus of this article will be suggestions for how caregivers can care for themselves — not an easy task, but an essential one. As you read, remember that there's nothing magical about any of these suggestions and that you are the expert on what works (and doesn't work) for you. These suggestions are presented like food on a buffet table, take what you like and leave the rest.

## ***Be kind and patient with yourself.***

This is something many of us need to constantly remind ourselves. Here's something to try: When you are feeling particularly self-critical, stop and ask yourself, "What would I say to a friend who was feeling guilty about something he or she did or neglected to do?" Would I think less of my friend or would I understand that he or she is doing the best anyone could under the circumstances? When we apply this test, I think most of us have no problem letting our hypothetical friend "off the hook." But somehow, when it's ourselves, we're not nearly as understanding. When you fall short of your expectations, be at least as kind to yourself as you would be to a good friend.

***Assess what you need and seek resources (people, organizations and information) that can help meet your needs.*** Some of us are good at the *seeking* part, but not about the *assessing* part. We need to have a clear sense of what it is that would be most helpful, otherwise our Internet searches and numerous phone calls and trips to the library might only be time consuming exercises. Before you begin searching, ask yourself: "What help or information, if it were available, would make caregiving significantly easier right now?" Be very specific and concrete. For example, saying "I need help" is not very useful, unless you can specify the kind of help you need. Do you need help with grocery shopping, or someone to come in a few times a week so you can get out of the house? If you need to talk to someone, are you looking for a sympathetic ear, or someone to help you solve a problem? Who you seek might be



very different, depending on how you answer those questions. This is particularly important in today's "information age," where there is so much available on the Internet and where there are so many experts promoting this program or that service. Be selective about what information or resources you choose. Always come back to the question, "What is it I need?" as opposed to "What is available?"

***Take care of your own physical and health needs.*** We all receive internal feedback that keeps us in touch with our bodies and how we are feeling. However, the stress that comes from caregiving responsibilities can interfere with our ability to pay attention to that feedback. Therefore, it is important that caregivers regularly do a self check-in. Your check-in can be very simple and brief. Here are some things you might ask yourself: "How am I feeling today? When was the last time I saw my doctor for a check-up or for treatment of an ongoing problem? Is it time to make an appointment?"

In addition to the regular self check-in, it is also important to pay attention to your eating habits, making sure you are having regular and nutritious meals. Mild to moderate exercise can also contribute to health and well-being. Be sure to check with your doctor, before engaging in any exercise program. Try to keep regular hours and insure that you are getting the amount of sleep you need.

**Take care of your emotional needs.** There are various strategies you can engage in to promote emotional self-care. Helpful strategies include relaxation techniques, meditation, guided imagery, and exercise or movement classes. There are also simple, everyday activities such as stretching, taking a hot bath, listening to soothing music, reading a good book, taking a nature walk, or just going for a walk in your neighborhood. Some people enjoy cooking, crocheting, talking on the phone, or journaling. Whatever you try, make sure it is something that works for you. One person's relaxation can be another person's frustration.

Having someone to talk with can also be very helpful. A relative, a friend, a member of your clergy, can all be important parts of your support network. But make sure you feel better after talking with the person you select. Support that doesn't feel like support, usually isn't.

Support groups with other caregivers can be another valuable resource. The American Brain Tumor Association has listings of support groups throughout the country. Many of these groups welcome family members/caregivers. You can call us for a list of support groups in your state.



If you find that friends and family and other non-professional support resources just aren't enough, or you find yourself feeling consistently overwhelmed, you may wish to consult with a mental health professional.

Your doctor can refer you to one. In addition, there are professional mental health associations that can help you locate someone in your area.

**Decide to “do one thing today.”** This strategy can be very helpful when you feel you are “spinning your wheels” and not accomplishing anything, despite always feeling busy. Simply decide to do one thing you've been putting off, and just do it. It can be something as simple as cleaning out a file, doing the laundry or making a phone call to the insurance company. Once you have done that “one thing,” it's amazing how much

better you feel being able to cross it off your mental “to-do” list. Then at the end of the day, if nothing else, you can say, “I accomplished ‘x’ today.”

**Be flexible.** Life is nothing if it is not about the need to be flexible. This is not to discount the value of routines. However, we all encounter situations where there is no clear sense of what to do, where we are just “out there winging it.” Don't be afraid to try doing things in different ways. Experiment. Re-evaluate your needs and priorities. What was important before your family member became ill, like having an immaculate house, may not be important now. Some things that weren't important before, like getting enough sleep or finding time for yourself, may be crucial now. Adopt a problem-solving approach. Break down what you need to accomplish into smaller steps and then brainstorm ways to get from one step to the next.

**Laugh.** The importance of laughter cannot be overemphasized. Laughter can ease tension, promote relaxation, and help you reconnect with the joy of living. Try to find the humor that is often just beneath the surface. And don't be afraid to laugh at yourself.

As we said at the start, caregiving can be an immense challenge. Accept the help that you are offered and seek out resources where there are gaps. Most importantly, accept that you are human and only one person. Love yourself with all your faults and limitations. When the going gets rough, know that having love and patience with yourself may be your greatest assets. Above all, remember you are not alone.

We welcome your feedback about these suggestions and invite you to send us your coping tips that are not included here, so we can share them with others. For information about specific resources focused on caregiver needs, please call us at 800-886-2282; ask for the social work office.



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