

Easing Caregiver Stress

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I don't have time to take care of myself, is a familiar, but dangerous, refrain for my family caregivers. Not tending to your own needs can place both you and the person you are caring for at risk. Here are some pointers on how to recognize and address caregiver stress and avoid caregiver burnout:

FIVE SIGNS TO WATCH FOR:

1. **Social withdrawal** from friends and activities that once brought pleasure.
I don't care about getting together with neighbors anymore.
2. **Depression** makes it difficult to cope with life or enjoy simple pleasures.
I don't have anything to look forward to.
3. **Exhaustion** makes it nearly impossible to complete necessary tasks.
I'm too tired for this.
4. **Irritability** leads to moodiness and triggers negative responses and reactions.
Leave me alone!
5. **Health Problems** begin to take their toll both mentally and physically.
I can't remember the last time I felt good.

FIVE STEPS TO TAKE:

1. **Give yourself credit, not guilt** – You are only human. Occasionally, you may lose patience and, at times, be unable to provide all the care in the way you would like. Remember, you are doing the best you can, so give yourself credit.
2. **Ask for help** – Trying to do everything by yourself will only leave you exhausted and, ultimately, ineffective as a caregiver. The active support of family and friends can be an enormous help.
3. **Take care of yourself** – Caregivers frequently devote themselves totally to those they care for, and in the process, neglect their own needs. Pay attention to yourself. Watch your diet, exercise and get plenty of rest. Arrange to take time off for shopping, a movie or an uninterrupted visit with a friend.
4. **Accept changes as they occur** – People with serious health conditions change and so do their needs. They often reach a point where they require more care than you can provide at home.
5. **Do legal and financial planning** – Consult an attorney on issues relating to durable power of attorney, living wills and trusts, future medical care and housing. Planning now can alleviate stress later.