



Caring for the caregiver: Learn to care for yourself

By Paula Price, RN, PhD

My husband recently underwent quadruple bypass surgery. During this time, I spent all of my waking hours at the hospital “just in case” he needed something. Sitting nervously by his bedside and worrying about his progression and healing began to take its toll. My husband (who is not a person to always follow directions from others), was not following the instructions of his healthcare professionals. One Friday morning, I suddenly knew I had reached my limit. I felt utterly helpless at not being able to help him get better, powerless at not being able to get him to do what he was supposed to do and exhausted from not looking after my basic needs for food and sleep.

My situation is but a small example of what it is like to be a caregiver, but certainly reflects what many caregivers may silently experience when caring for a loved one on

a long-term basis. This is especially true when there is no expectation that the care will lead to a better level of health and well-being.

Caregivers beware

The human spirit is remarkable, especially in terms of our capacity to give to others: Devoted elderly couples commit to remaining at home together; brothers care for sisters; and adult children juggle the responsibilities of a job and family, while providing care to aging parents. The caregiver role cannot be taken for granted—not by society and certainly not by caregivers themselves. The role imparts huge responsibilities.

When our health declines or we begin to lose our day-to-day functional abilities (whether the physical ability to go shopping and prepare meals or cognitive abilities) we cannot expect to enjoy a high quality of life

without the support and commitment of caregivers. The caregiver becomes the most important person in the life of the individual requiring care—he or she is the person relied on daily for help and support.

A recent study showed that eight per cent of Canadians believe that aging at home offers a better quality of life. Seventy per cent of us want both ourselves and our parents to be able to age gracefully without leaving the principal residence. The challenge for family caregivers, like me, is finding a balance in our lives so that we have the energy to provide care to our loved ones. It is crucial to avoid reaching a point of exhaustion or frustration where we have nothing left to give.

Here are three simple solutions to help ensure you will be able to continue to be the best caregiver possible to your loved one.

1. Eat right

Ensure you are eating enough of the right kinds of foods. This isn't always easy when you are tired and busy or have a number of other demands in your life.

Setting aside time once a week for meal

preparation can increase the likelihood that you will eat well. If you have containers of prepared fruits and vegetables you will be more likely to include these in your diet on a regular basis and avoid quick snack-food choices. In addition, preparing larger quantities of food that you can freeze ahead for future meals frees up extra time away from cooking. Finally, setting your dinner table with a pair of candles and playing some soft music in the background can help create an enjoyable experience. Take a few minutes to simply relax and enjoy your meal, rather than letting the dinner mealtime become another task.

2. De-stress

Caregiver stress is a normal part of the caregiver role. It is how you respond to this stress that can help change your quality of life. Recognition is the first strategy for dealing with stress. Once you are aware that something is not quite right, you can do something about it.

Exercise of any type is a great activity to help manage your stress. A 20-minute walk each day can make a significant difference to

“The time to relax is when you don't have time for it”

Sidney J. Harris

Keeping yourself fresh

Five tips for re-energizing yourself:

1. Laugh—take time every day to think of a funny story from your past or play an episode of a favourite sitcom show or movie. If you have a hard time trying to remember funny stories, ask your family and friends about their favourite stories. Jot these down on index cards that you can refer to when you want a good laugh
2. Reminisce—treat yourself to reminiscing about some of your favourite times with friends and family, whether a celebration, individual accomplishment or vacation. You may want to select some of your favourite music to play softly in the background as you put your feet up and immerse yourself in remembering those times
3. Sing—play one of your favourite songs and sing along. The more upbeat the music, the more refreshed you will feel after singing or humming along with a tune or two.
4. Enjoy nature—nature can be enjoyed from indoors or out. If you are indoors you can spend time watching the variety of birds that come to the feeder every day. And if you want to venture outside, spend time noticing the colours in trees and flowers in the neighbourhood, listening to the wind or simply watching the clouds drift by overhead.
5. Take up a hobby—make time once a week to spend time at a hobby, such as woodworking, scrapbooking, working on your family tree, needlework, playing bridge, playing darts or clay modeling. There are many things to try! It may be a hobby that you loved to do in the past or one that you have always wanted to do but never made the time for.



“The quickest way to become an old dog is to stop learning new tricks.”

John Rooney

Results of a recent survey of Canadians about aging have revealed the following:

- 72.5 per cent of Canadians expect to be involved in the choice of a caregiver for their aging parents.
- 70 per cent of Canadians want either their parents or themselves to “age in place.” The desire to remain in the home increases up with age.
- Two top reasons for wanting to stay at home are comfort and independence.
- 79 per cent of Canadians believe that they and their parents will live longer and enjoy a better quality of life if they age at home. Those aged 50 years or older express this opinion more strongly than younger people.
- 70 per cent of Canadians do not feel that public healthcare will be adequate to meet their needs as they age.
- 76.1 per cent of women versus 60.9 percent of men are concerned about the adequacy of the healthcare system to meet their needs as they age.
- 70.8 per cent of Canadians are most concerned about losing control and independence if they have to move into a senior care home or nursing home.

both your mood and stress level. And if getting outdoors isn't possible, perhaps you can set aside 20 minutes a day to complete a series of stretching exercises or follow along with a yoga exercise DVD.

Journal writing is another effective strategy for managing stress. There are no rules or limits to what you write. Jotting down something about your day-to-day experiences as a caregiver may be a great outlet for expressing some of those emotions and frustrations that you would otherwise carry around with you. Or perhaps this is a chance for you to try your hand at some creative writing, which can offer a wonderful opportunity to escape your routine activities. It is often the process of writing itself, not the content of your writing, that can help you de-stress. You may be pleasantly surprised at how differently you feel if you set aside 15–20 minutes every day to jot down your thoughts.

Developing and maintaining a positive mindset is another strategy that can effectively decrease your levels of stress. Spending a few minutes every day repeating some positive thoughts or affirmations—such as “Today I will feel less stressed and more relaxed” or “I am doing a good job as a caregiver”—will help you de-stress. Repetition of the positive thoughts and affirmations helps to counteract the negative thoughts you may have running through your mind. It may take a bit of time and prac-

tise repeating your positive thoughts a number of times every day to reinforce your positive mindset. It may not be easy at first, but given enough time you will begin to maintain a more positive outlook and feel less stressed.

3. Make “me” time

One of the hardest things for a caregiver to do is make time for themselves. While you cannot change the health status of your loved one, there are options available that will give you a break from the demands and responsibilities of the caregiver role. Try working with friends and family to develop a specific plan ahead of time to give you some extra support. The plan may involve as little as asking a friend to visit on a regular basis or asking family to do the food shopping for you. If more ongoing support is required, try involving a homecare provider. He or she can help with light housekeeping, meal preparation or providing personal care to your loved one.

The caregiver role is truly a privilege and a role that not only challenges us on a day-to-day basis, but also offers an opportunity to give back in ways we never imagined possible. However, we need to learn to take good care of ourselves too—to be the best we can be. ●

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