



Recognizing Caregiver Burnout

Caregiver burnout is a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion that may be accompanied by a change in attitude -- from positive and caring to negative and unconcerned. Burnout can occur when caregivers don't get the help they need, or if they try to do more than they are able -- either physically or financially. Caregivers who are "burned out" may experience fatigue, stress, anxiety, and depression. Many caregivers also feel guilty if they spend time on themselves rather than on their ill or elderly loved ones.

What Are the Symptoms of Caregiver Burnout?

The symptoms of caregiver burnout are similar to the symptoms of stress and depression. They may include:

- Withdrawal from friends and family
- Loss of interest in activities previously enjoyed
- Feeling blue, irritable, hopeless, and helpless
- Changes in appetite, weight, or both
- Changes in sleep patterns
- Getting sick more often
- Feelings of wanting to hurt yourself or the person for whom you are caring
- Emotional and physical exhaustion
- Excessive use of alcohol and/or sleep medications
- Irritability

Call 911 or the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255 if you think you might hurt yourself or anyone else.

What Causes Caregiver Burnout?

Caregivers often are so busy caring for others that they tend to neglect their own emotional, physical, and spiritual health. The demands on a caregiver's body, mind, and emotions can easily seem overwhelming, leading to fatigue and hopelessness -- and, ultimately, burnout. Other factors that can lead to caregiver burnout include:

- **Role confusion** -- Many people are confused when thrust into the role of caregiver. It can be difficult for a person to separate her role as caregiver from her role as spouse, lover, child, friend, etc.
- **Unrealistic expectations** -- Many caregivers expect their involvement to have a positive effect on the health and happiness of the patient. This may be unrealistic for patients suffering from a progressive disease, such as Parkinson's or Alzheimer's.
- **Lack of control** -- Many caregivers become frustrated by a lack of money, resources, and skills to effectively plan, manage, and organize their loved one's care.
- **Unreasonable demands** -- Some caregivers place unreasonable burdens upon themselves, in part because they see providing care as their exclusive responsibility.
- **Other factors** -- Many caregivers cannot recognize when they are suffering burnout and eventually get to the point where they cannot function effectively. They may even become sick themselves.

How Can I Prevent Caregiver Burnout?

Here are some steps you can take to help prevent caregiver burnout:

- Find someone you trust -- such as a friend, co-worker, or neighbor -- to talk to about your feelings and frustrations.
- Set realistic goals, accept that you may need help with caregiving, and turn to others for help with some tasks.
- Be realistic about your loved one's disease, especially if it is a progressive disease such as Parkinson's or Alzheimer's.
- Don't forget about yourself because you're too busy caring for someone else. Set aside time for yourself, even if it's just an hour or two.

Remember, taking care of yourself is not a luxury; it is an absolute necessity if you're going to be an effective caregiver.

- Talk to a professional. Most therapists, social workers, and clergy members are trained to counsel individuals dealing with a wide range of physical and emotional issues.
- Take advantage of respite care services. Respite care provides a temporary break for caregivers. This can range from a few hours of in-home care to a short stay in a nursing home or assisted living facility.
- Know your limits and do a reality check of your personal situation. Recognize and accept your potential for caregiver burnout.
- Educate yourself. The more you know about the illness, the more effective you will be in caring for the person with the illness.
- Develop new tools for coping. Remember to lighten up and accentuate the positive. Use humor to help deal with everyday stresses.
- Stay healthy by eating right and getting plenty of exercise and sleep.
- Accept your feelings. Having negative feelings -- such as frustration or anger -- about your responsibilities or the person for whom you are caring is normal. It does not mean you are a bad person or a bad caregiver.

Where Can I Turn for Help With Caregiver Burnout?

If you are already suffering from stress and depression, seek medical attention. Stress and depression are treatable disorders. If you want to help prevent burnout, consider turning to the following resources for help with your caregiving:

- **Home health services** -- These agencies provide home health aids and nurses for short-term care, if your loved one is acutely ill. Some agencies provide short-term respite care.
- **Adult day care**-- These programs offer a place for seniors to socialize, engage in a variety of activities, and receive needed medical care and other services.

- **Nursing homes or assisted living facilities** -- These institutions sometimes offer short-term respite stays to provide caregivers a break from their caregiving responsibilities.
- **Private care aides** -- These are professionals who specialize in assessing current needs and coordinating care and services.
- **Caregiver support services** -- These include support groups and other programs that can help caregivers recharge their batteries, meet others coping with similar issues, find more information, and locate additional resources.
- **Area Agency on Aging** -- Contact your local Area Agency on Aging or your local chapter of the AARP for services available in your area such as adult day care services, caregiver support groups, and respite care.
- **National organizations** -- Look in a phone directory or search online for local agencies (such as Family Caregiver Alliance), chapters of national organizations dedicated to assisting people with illnesses such as Parkinson's disease or stroke. These groups can provide resources and information about respite care and support groups.

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Sources ^

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