



14 Life-Changing Tips to Relieve Caregiver Stress



It's a fact: caring for another person is stressful. Even though caregiving is one of the most rewarding and selfless acts of kindness a family member can provide, its challenges equal its gifts. In this article, we cover the symptoms and root causes of caregiver stress and offer insightful tips from current caregivers on how to relieve the tension.

What Exactly is Caregiver Stress?

Caregiver stress is the physical and emotional strain that results from providing continuous care for another person. When this stress is prolonged, it can cause serious physical and mental health problems for those providing the care.

Caregiver stress may be the precursor to the more severe caregiver burnout, though many of the symptoms overlap.

Symptoms of Caregiver Stress

As a family caregiver, it's important to keep an eye out for any negative physical or emotional symptoms you experience, as these can lead to long-term damage. Physical signs that you might be experiencing caregiver stress include:

- Frequent headaches or body aches
- Always feeling tired
- Sleeping too much or too little
- Rapid weight gain or weight loss
- Abusing alcohol, recreational drugs, or prescription medications

Emotional signs of caregiver stress include:

- Moodiness – easily angered or irritated
- Persistent sadness or hopelessness
- Lack of interest in previously enjoyed activities
- Feelings of loneliness or isolation from other people

It's known that the long-term effects of stress can be detrimental to health. Long-term symptoms can include:

- Serious mental health issues such as anxiety and depression

- Weakened immune system
- Digestive issues
- Alcoholism or drug addiction
- Increased risk for chronic diseases
- Short-term memory loss and issues paying attention

If you or a loved one are exhibiting signs of caregiver stress, it's important that you first talk to your doctor about ways to ease your symptoms. There are medications, holistic remedies, therapies and more that are designed to help.

Causes of Caregiver Stress

Common causes of stress include: financial strain, relationship role changes and lack of rest for the caregiver.

The financial aspect of caring for your loved one can be one of the most troubling for caregivers. The average annual cost of caregiving-related expenses is \$6,954 out-of-pocket or nearly 20% of a household's average annual income. Caregivers often spend less money on leisure activities as a result with nearly half reporting a decrease in going out to eat or taking vacations due to the costs of caregiving.

Another cause of stress is the emotional impact that comes from a reversal of caregiving roles. If caring for a parent or an older sibling it can be quite disorienting to start taking responsibility for someone who was previously responsible for you.

Finally, many caregivers neglect to give themselves the additional rest necessary for good health, since their primary focus is often on their loved one. Providing frequent support for another human is essentially doubling the work our bodies are designed to do. We all have a finite amount of energy – both mental and physical – and when we refrain from taking regular breaks, we run on fumes and aren't giving our own bodies what we need.

Remember: giving your own body and mind the care they need is one of the most important components of being a good caregiver.



Top Tips for Managing Caregiver Stress

The feelings of tension you may feel as a caregiver can frustrate and exhaust you. Fortunately, there are plenty of helpful techniques you can use to manage your stress. We took to social media and got feedback from real caregivers on how they manage the pressure. Here are our favorite tips from fellow caregivers and thought leaders on how to deal with caregiver stress:



1. Complete Small Tasks to Regain Control

When dealing with another person's fluctuating health, it's totally normal to feel overwhelmed and out of control. If this describes you, try this caregiver's simple, helpful tip:

“Doing laundry was soothing for me. If I was feeling overwhelmed, I'd tell myself that I could do that one thing. It was helpful to make order out of chaos. I'd feel as though I had control over something, and I felt great satisfaction out of seeing neatly folded piles of laundry before I threw myself back into the fray.”



2. Eat Right

What we put into our bodies is what we get out of them. Proper nutrition is crucial self-care that can be left to the wayside when under a lot of stress. However, stressful times are when your body needs healthy fuel the most. Avoid skipping meals, snacks or overindulging in alcohol. Instead, set aside regular times each day to enjoy a balanced breakfast, lunch, snack and dinner. For more ideas, check out this list of stress-relieving foods which include tea, salmon and (yay!) dark chocolate.

3. Get Enough Sleep

When your mind is racing around a track with a million things to do on it, it's only natural that your sleep may suffer. But you can't avoid it: your body and brain unquestionably need time to recharge. Amazing things happen when you sleep, like muscle relaxation, tissue growth and repair and energy restoration. How well you sleep affects nearly every aspect of what happens in your waking hours, so make sure to get those quality ZZZs. Aim for 7-9 hours each night, preferably at consistent times.

4. Exercise

If you are physically capable, getting your body moving and your blood pumping is an almost guaranteed way to relieve tension. Physical activity pumps up your "feel-good" endorphins and refocuses your mind on your body's movements, releasing stress and improving your mood. Physically, exercise helps maintain a healthy weight and can even regulate your sleep cycle by making it easier to fall (and stay) asleep.



Virtually any physical activity works: walking, jogging, gardening, housecleaning, biking, swimming or anything else that gets you moving. Find time, even if it means asking someone else to provide care while you take a break.

5. Try Meditation

Meditation creates a sense of calm, peace and balance that benefits both mind and body, and it encourages the use of breathing to get through stress. You'll focus your attention on the sensations you experience, squeezing out anxious thoughts. The best part? You can meditate almost anywhere, from a doctor's office to a bus ride.

6. Do a Little Coloring (Really!)

Think coloring books are just for kids? Think again. Adult coloring books have become an increasingly popular way to decrease stress through mindfulness, the act of focusing on being in the present moment. Added bonus: they're super portable!



7. Have a Healthy Dose of Laughter

Did you know that laughter lightens your emotional load and actually causes physical changes in your body? Laughter enhances your oxygen intake, relieves mental stress and soothes physical tension. Try switching up the nightly news with a favorite comedian's stand-up or a classic rom-com or call your funniest friend. And speaking of friends...

8. Get Social

Spending quality time with friends and family has long been a stress relief tactic used across many cultures and time periods. When you spend time with your social circle, you experience better mental health, a stronger immune system and can even lower your risk of dementia!

If you don't have much time to meet up out of the house, or your friends and family are long-distance, don't worry: video chatting and phone calls can provide many of the same positive effects as face-to-face socializing.

9. Start Journaling

Putting your thoughts and feelings into written words can be a good release for pent-up emotions. Writing often provides perspective that thinking, or even talking, cannot always give. In addition to venting out your worries, journaling is also a good place to list out all the positives in your life that you're grateful for.

P.S. If you're looking for a place to start, every CaringBridge site comes complete with a ready-to-use Journal feature. Our online journal allows you to choose from a variety of privacy options, whether you choose to publicly share your health journey or keep a totally private diary.

10. Get a Pet

Therapy animals are around for a reason. Our favorite furry friends provide many stress-relieving benefits when they cuddle us, learn a new trick or simply just look adorable. Whether you prefer a dog, cat, parakeet or fish, owning and loving a pet can be enormously beneficial. And if you're thinking that you can't take care of yet another thing, not to fear: these low-maintenance pets might change your mind.



11. Just Say 'No'

Yep, you read that right. You are more than allowed to turn requests down if you feel that you're getting overwhelmed with responsibilities and places you just have to be. When you say 'no' to adding another "to-do" on your list, you're opening up an opportunity to have very important time for yourself. You are a priority, too!

12. Reclaim Your Identity

Spending time on your passions will help remind you that you are more than a caregiver. Try to take time at least once a day to engage in an activity that makes you feel most like yourself outside of your caregiving role. It can feel like you don't even have time to wash your face at the end of a long day, much less take 30 minutes to yourself. But there are opportunities to carve out you-time every single day. If you leave for work, use your lunch hour to go outside and read a book or magazine. If you stay home, take time to play your favorite music or make dinnertime exciting by cooking a fun, new recipe. It's the little things that make us who we are and it's important not to forget about them.

13. Prioritize Your Own Medical Needs

Caregivers still have regular checkups and dentist appointments, just like anyone else. It can be easy to get so caught up in the medical treatment of your loved one that you forget that you actually share some of the same needs. Take note of any appointments you've missed or may need in the next few months, and if necessary, start enlisting help so that you can make your appointments without a hitch.

Also, don't forget about therapy. It might not be for everyone, but therapy is a tool that's definitely worth considering. Many therapists specialize in the managing and relieving of stress through means such as Progressive Relaxation Training, mindfulness-based techniques and more. To find out about the different types of therapy and which one might be right for you, talk to your doctor about your symptoms and discuss getting a referral.

14. Ask for (and Accept) Help

It's ironic that the people who spend so much of their time and energy helping others often find it incredibly difficult to accept help themselves. Here's what a couple caregivers said helped them with this:

“Being open to help. Recognizing I couldn't do everything, and letting others share their gifts of time, meals and service to us. And finding the courage in myself to be specific in telling them what was needed.”

“Accepting help when it is offered! If you say no too many times, people will stop offering. Don't feel guilty for taking some time for yourself. If you burn out, things will not be good for all involved!”

Some other ideas on this: Make a to-do list and recruit others to pitch in to help with meal planning, trips to the pharmacy, walking the dog, watering plants... everything that goes with your caregiver role.



Taking Care of the Caregiver

Rosalynn Carter, prominent advocate of caregiving, famously stated that there are only four kinds of people in the world: Those who have been caregivers, those who are currently caregivers, those who will be caregivers, and those who will need caregivers. We hope these 14 tips not only help you manage the stress that comes along with supporting a loved one, but also serve as a reminder that you deserve the same amount of care that you give out every day.



Caregiver Assistance and Support Groups

- AARP (1-888) 687-2277
- Family Caregiver Alliance (1-800) 445-8106
- Caregiver.com (954) 893-0550
- Caregiver Action Network (202) 454-3970
- Rosalynn Carter Institute for Caregiving (229) 928-1234
- Well Spouse Association (1-800) 838-0879



Start a CaringBridge Site

CaringBridge is a nonprofit social network dedicated to helping family and friends communicate with and support loved ones during a health crisis through the use of free, personal websites. Could you or a loved one benefit from starting a CaringBridge site to keep family and friends informed and get the love, and support they need? Start a site at www.Caringbridge.org/createwebsite

