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March 2021 Vol 35/No 3 | \$6

## NAVIGATING FAMILY CAREGIVING

How to keep yourself afloat so you can provide the best possible care to your aging spouse, parent, or relative.



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**Caring for a loved one is a noble calling that teaches you much about yourself. You will reevaluate the roles you play in life, test your limits, and likely find an inner strength you didn't know was there. But you'll also feel intense stress, difficult emotions, and even physical repercussions.**

### My journey

Twenty years ago, I was writing national health-care policy for the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services when my own caregiving journey began. After surgery to remove a malignant brain tumor, my mother-in-law stayed with my family to recuperate. What we thought would be two weeks stretched into two years. Even after she returned to her own apartment, she required constant, extensive care as the state of her cognition and body steadily declined. When the cancer returned in the fifth year, we hired a home care agency to help us care for her in her final days.

That experience changed everything—even my career. I went on to open my own

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home care company to provide others with the kind of support we found so valuable, and I then began studying caregiving as a phenomenon of social science for my doctoral degree. Throughout this journey, I've garnered a wealth of knowledge that I'd like to share with you.

## Changing roles

Dealing with conflicting roles is among the first and biggest challenges that caregivers have to face. When you are caring for a loved one who needs an outsized amount of your attention, care, and time, you may struggle to maintain the standards you're accustomed to in your other roles. You may be less effective at work, unable to attend your children's school activities, or too busy to socialize with friends. Your loved one needs your attention and care, but so do your boss, your children, and other people in your life.

## Time constraints

As the needs of your loved one grow, you will have to spend more of your time in caregiving, while still trying to fulfill all of your other roles. It can feel like a marathon without a finish line. To ease the way, try these strategies:

1. Carve out time in your existing schedule to address your loved one's needs. What can you swap?
2. Choose the timing that works best for you. For example, if your mother needs you to accompany her to a doctor's visit, get involved in the scheduling so you can select an appointment time that's most convenient—or least disruptive—for you.
3. Determine how much time you will spend in a caregiving task. When you stop by for a visit, for example, decide in advance how long you will stay.
4. Evaluate how often you must perform care-related tasks to be more efficient. For instance, if you're picking up prescription medications, try to plan one pharmacy trip per month for all refills.

5. Consider the order of all the other things you're doing, and perform your caregiving tasks at the most convenient place in the order.
6. Make sure your schedule allows you to do things that you find personally rewarding. You have to give yourself permission to do this. It can feel indulgent to take time for yourself, but you have to restore the energy and the motivation that you need to keep going.

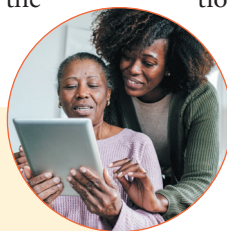
## Beware burnout

As stress grows, you're at risk of burnout or compassion fatigue. That can be characterized by bottled-up emotions, isolation from others, substance abuse used to mask feelings, poor self-care (related to hygiene or appearance, for example), debt, and even chronic physical ailments such as gastrointestinal problems or recurrent colds.

It's important for caregivers to practice self-care to avoid burnout and continue helping those who depend on them. Here are 10 tips you may want to consider to reduce caregiving-induced stress:

- Seek help from a counselor.
- Exercise.
- Arrange for respite care by another caregiver.
- See your physician.
- Engage with a caregiver support group.
- Connect with online caregiver communities.
- Set realistic expectations about what you can and cannot do.
- Go outdoors.
- Start keeping a journal and write about things you're grateful for.

While caregiving for your loved one is never going to be easy, it will be easier when you address your emotional needs rather than suppressing or ignoring them.



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## Managing emotions

As you experience a new role, juggle obligations, and adjust to caregiving, you will likely face a range of “negative” emotions. Of all the emotions that family caregivers confront, guilt is one of the most pervasive. You're also likely to feel grief as you watch a loved one decline, and anticipatory grief for the loss of a future relationship or time together. You may feel resentment, anger, anguish, or countless other emotions that are completely normal. The stress of caregiving can leave you feeling exhausted, fatigued, irritable, compulsive, and depressed.

## Skills

Because your loved one's health will change over time, the skills you need to care for them must continually evolve. A person who can walk now may need to be lifted in a year. You may have to learn to give injections, clean wounds, or use home medical equipment. If you know a CNA, invite them to come with you to see your loved one so they can show you some tips. You can also request a demonstration by a provider who's working with your loved one, or watch training videos on YouTube.

## Outsource

If there comes a time that you can't provide the level of care that your loved one needs, you can turn to professional help. There is nothing wrong with outsourcing caregiving, whether it's as simple as hiring a nursing assistant to bathe a parent or as complex as finding a memory care facility for a spouse with Alzheimer's disease. Seeking help is not abandoning your loved one, but rather taking steps to make sure they get what they need to have the best quality of life possible. ■

*Bottom Line Health* interviewed Aaron Blight, EdD, adjunct professor at Shenandoah University, advisory board member of the Shenandoah Area Agency on Aging, and founder of Caregiving Kinetics. He is the author of the book *When Caregiving Calls: Guidance as You Care for a Parent, Spouse, or Aging Relative*.