



The Sojourner Project

...help for the journey

Caring for the Caregiver

Learn how stress manifests in your body

Learn the early warning signs and take action before it seriously impacts your health or ability to function effectively

- **Physically** tension will manifest such as head, neck or back aches from tense or clenched muscles. It can cause significant digestive issues. It can disturb sleep patterns fluctuating between insomnia from worry and physical exhaustion from doing too much all day. Stress can make us more prone to illness and trigger unhealthy behaviors like eating, drinking or sleeping too much as a way to cope.
- **Emotionally** we become irritable, moody, anxious, easily distracted and have difficulty concentrating. We can feel trapped overwhelmed and out of control of our lives.
- **Socially** we can become isolated and withdrawn and it can negatively impact our relationship with our spouse, friends and coworkers. And it will impair our ability to be sensitive, compassionate and patient when caring for our loved one.

The three unique causes of stress for the family caregiver:

- **Time Management**
 - Family caregivers are usually juggling several roles, changing roles, and are generally overwhelmed with the additional the tasks, responsibilities and worry of caring for another person. Trying to find the time and energy to take care of it all and to do it well can be more than one can handle.
- **Conflict**
 - When families are not able to work together to care for a loved one, if there is tension and conflict the job of the caregiver is just that much more complicated. Trying to care for someone when there is disagreement or arguing can make every decision and situation so much more difficult. I covered this topic in depth in Part Three of CGS with lessons on managing expectations, and effective communication.
 - For families that usually work well together conflict can arise when caring for someone with dementia. Struggling to keep safe a loved one who is in the early stages of the disease and is unaware of their disability can create serious strain on the caregiving relationship. Creating conflict when your help is seen as interference. I covered this topic in depth in Part 7 of CGS.
- **Emotional Burden**
 - All family caregivers struggle with this silent and weighty stressor that they will push aside to focus on more immediate needs. All caregivers struggle with chronic feelings of worry, fear, guilt, sadness and loss. You will feel it's detrimental effects unless you acknowledge and address the emotional burden of caregiving.

Suggestions for managing stress

1. Know yourself

It is important to know what makes you feel better and how you need to recharge your batteries. Extroverts will need to add more time with friends and outside activities to their schedule while introverts will need to add more quiet time alone.

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2. Sleep

Learning how to get a good night's rest is essential to being a less stressed caregiver. Here are a few suggestions:

- **Know how much** sleep you actually need every night. Most people need 8 hours while some need more.
- **Count backwards** from the time you need to get up to know when to be asleep.
- **Add an hour** It takes an hour for the body to trigger melatonin and other biochemistry to induce sleep.
- **Limit input** from all electronic devices that send stimulating signals to the brain and keep you awake
- **Clear the mind** of the things cluttering it and do something that will quiet the mind and settle the body.
- **Set the stage** by making sure your room is dark, quiet and cool, these are important triggers for sleep.
- **Talk to your doctor** about the over-the-counter remedies or prescription solutions available.

3. Move more and more often

Make a conscious effort to be more physically active. Find simple ways to incorporate more movement into your daily routine. Park the car further away, take the stairs, walk the dog more often and for longer distances.

4. Ask for help and take a break

Delegate responsibilities or tasks that can be done by others.

Ask a family member or research local facilities that offer respite services to give you a break for a few days.

Talk to a therapist or counselor. Find someone who can be your advocate and will walk with you through your caregiving journey. A good therapist will focus exclusively on you, can validate your thoughts and feelings and even teach you some new strategies for dealing with difficult situations

5. Take a minute to stop ~ listen ~ and breathe

A simple daily meditation practice not only reduces anxiety and depression but also benefits the physical body over the long term. Find a method and process that works for you, your lifestyle and belief system. Make the time to quiet your mind and take a mental time out on a daily basis. Over time this daily practice will significantly your mental and emotional well being as well as your physical health.

Rest Stop

Set your phone or timer for one minute

Sit comfortably and rest your elbows on your knees or a table

Use your hands to cover your ears and notice how you can hear the sound of your breathing

Start the timer cover your ears and listen to the sound of your breath

Don't try to change how you breathe, just listen

If you get distracted (and you will) then return your attention to the sound of your breath

If you need to think about something then repeat to yourself silently

"I am breathing in" on the in breath and "I am breathing out" on the out breathe.

*~ Stop ~ Listen ~ and Breathe ~
... just for a minute*

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