

HOW CAREGIVERS CARE FOR THEMSELVES

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Whether you are an experienced caregiver or more recently started in a new caregiving situation, you know the pressures you face everyday to fulfill your difficult and demanding roles. Considering some of these suggestions for coping with the stress of compassionate caregiving may help you and your fellow caregivers.

1. To be healthy caregivers **you must put self-care first**. This is not selfish, but good sense. Your balanced rest, nurture, and replenishing enables you to have the energy and stamina to be 'available' in your caregiving. Only you can do this part as a regular rhythm in your life. Care or love for your neighbor begins with love and care for your nearest neighbor, yourself. Then you can give from what you already are and have. An empty cup serves no one.

2. If we focus only on what we "feel" when we are giving care day after day, we may overlook what we think and believe. **Feelings are important**. They are the major way we invest in other people or tasks. But we also choose, decide, act, assess and evaluate in order to connect our feelings to the whole person or the whole scene. We care with our whole selves, in order to relate to the whole person we serve or give care with.

3. To maintain our ability to care, **we learn to set limits**, and find ways to say "no" without becoming stuck in guilt, shame or unrealistic expectations. No one can 'do it all', or 'just keep going' without paying a heavy cost physically, emotionally, or spiritually. We are not machines, and will not treat ourselves, nor allow others to treat us in this manner. Appropriate limits actually make us all more realistically human, and encourage balance and wholeness.

4. By **accepting our limitations**, we are more clear about what we can actually do or not do to help another person. When we expect ourselves to always have endless energy, all the right answers, solutions, or options, we discount the caregiving relationship or the other person, and may miss the energy, ideas, or creativity that together may be better than either of us brought to the scene of need. Two healing, caring minds/persons are better than one. Authentic caregiving is a partnership to move together to address specific needs.

5. When we have our good moments or good days, we know that at **the heart of caregiving is the exchange of gifts**. We have all said on some occasions, "I received much more than I gave". In this moment, we know the rich mystery that touches both the one who gives care and the one who receive it. And we are both changed. This rarely happens when we are so exhausted that we are a 'bundle of raw nerves' because we have neglected our self-care responsibilities. Time to re-visit the above steps.

6. When our 'cup' has something in it, when our self-nurture has refreshed us, we experience times of **strength with flexibility**. We then know that we "do have something to give and share!" We can 'take a deep breath' and embrace our own ability to be tolerant, patient, forgiving, and gentle. Often it is by believing in "SomeOne/God or something beyond us" that we find the resources for this. We are not able to be caregivers alone. We need help and support, and have the right to expect this from our human companions in families, friends, co-workers and our faith traditions. Without this, we may try to make it through by use of will, power, control or manipulation, rather than care giving and receiving. Spirit-filled compassion has no boundaries.

7. When the caregiving is both given 'into ourselves' as well as 'outward to others', **we celebrate the awesome truth of human uniqueness and sacredness**. We experience the deep, intimate, meaningful connections of being fully alive, enriched and blessed. We know we are most hurt and helped by authentic human relationships. By the exchange of 'care' meeting a 'need', we embrace with gratitude our own transformation toward being fully human.