

A Love Letter to Caregivers

Dear fellow Caregivers,

In this, the season of love, I want you to know that you are not alone. I see you. I feel you and share in your struggle. For 24 years I have cared for my disabled daughter, most of those years as a single parent, all while working full time and trying to stay afloat. The joy, the pain, the reward, the exhaustion; I know you understand what I'm talking about.

Several years ago, on the advice of a friend, I went to a workshop for caregivers and learned about something very real: Compassion Fatigue. Are you familiar with the term? Perhaps not, but I'm betting you have experienced the symptoms at one point or another in your caregiving journey. According to *PsychologyToday.com*, Research Psychologist Charles Figley coined compassion fatigue as "a state of exhaustion and dysfunction, biologically, physiologically and emotionally, as a result of prolonged exposure to compassion stress." Also referred to as secondary trauma or vicarious trauma, "sufferers often neglect their own self-care, and inner life, as they regularly prioritize the needs of a care recipient". In other words (mine), burnout from loving, caring and, as a by-product, placing ourselves on the back burner. I think at one point I realized I hadn't made a dental appointment for myself in 7 years! Finding some time to relax or unwind? Unthinkable!!

But think about it, we must. *PsychologyToday.com* states the physical and psychological effects of compassion fatigue are numerous and can include disrupted sleep, anxiety, headaches, stomach upset, irritability, numbness, emotional disconnection, immune deficiency and depression. I think that's just the tip of the iceberg! Personally speaking, I developed chronic migraines and suffered early menopause, which my GYN believes was directly related to caregiver stress. I realize I'm preaching to the choir here, but don't we deserve better?

I am aware there is no easy answer. How many times have you heard said, "You must put your oxygen mask on first before assisting others." Well yes, but what if I'm too worn out to reach up for the darn mask? I had to learn the hard way that, no matter which way I looked at it, I had to ask for help.

PsychologyToday.com staff reviewers emphasize that compassion fatigue can be counteracted through regular exercise and healthy eating, a commitment to adequate rest and regular time off, maintaining emotional boundaries and spending time in therapy. I would add to that, being intentional and direct in verbalizing needs. The help I needed looked different from day to day, and being specific about what I wanted from helpers made all the difference.

Following the suggestions of other caregivers, "bring the body and the mind will follow", I joined a support group and began practicing regular meditation. It helped. Being with others who understood me helped. Compassion fatigue is less a part of my vocabulary these days.

There isn't one right way to cope with being a caregiver, but you already know this. If willing to give it some thought, I would highly recommend looking into ESCCI's Family Caregiver Support Program. Are you... caring for someone age 60 or older... a grandparent aged 55 or older caring for a child... an adult age 55 caring for a person with a disability... or caring for someone of any age with Alzheimer's Disease or related dementia? If so, a Family Caregiver Support Specialist will listen to you, assess your circumstances, and recommend strategies to help you survive in your role. Each caregiver comes with individual needs that may require only a brief connection, or a more in-depth service. There is no wrong story or door.

Recently, my daughter spread her wings a bit and moved into a shared living home about an hour away. I truly wasn't sure this day would ever come! And I can't tell you the emotional rollercoaster we have been riding the last few months. All the good feelings and natural frights run rampant! My caregiving role has changed for the first time in nearly a quarter century, and I am doing my best to make the adjustment. But most importantly, my child is safe, happy and taking advantage of a wonderful growth opportunity. It's all I've ever wanted for her.

I'll be honest, I'm kind of waiting for the other shoe to drop. The caregiver in me hasn't fully let go, although I'm not sure that's possible anyway. My own experience reminds me, as if a friend were whispering in my ear, that taking this leap of faith is the right thing to do.

As your sister in caregiving, I acknowledge and applaud you. If compassion fatigue is something you are experiencing, please ask for help. For a referral to ESCCI's Family Caregiver Support Program, please call 508-394-4630.

Sincerely,

Sarah Franey

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