



Take Care of YOU, the Caregiver

As our population ages, approximately 1 in 3 adults in our country qualify themselves as “informal caregivers” to other adults. This statistic means that you are certainly not alone, but it doesn’t mean this is an easy task. The work you do is so important and greatly benefits your loved one, but don’t lose sight on the importance of your own health and quality of life. Not only will taking good care of yourself benefit YOU, it will also improve your ability to be the best caregiver you can be.

Keep up with your medical appointments

You are busy all day; the hours pass quickly by, and before you know it, it’s time to wake up and start again. It may seem like there is no extra time to squeeze in for yourself. COVID-19 has undoubtedly added to the equation and worry about exposure in your household may have caused you delay your own health appointments. But medical offices have adapted to safety protocols and are even offering more opportunities to connect through telemedicine. Whether you are not feeling well, or are due for your annual check-ups, screenings, and vaccines (including COVID-19), take out your calendar and phone --and make a plan to schedule these visits.

Eat a well-balanced diet and stay hydrated

- A nutritious diet, including three meals and plenty of fluids, will help boost your immune system and give you the energy you need to stay healthy and do your job effectively. If cooking a home-made meal every night is not an option, don’t completely rule out home delivery or meal prep services. There are many different options available that do not incorporate processed foods and can provide you with a delicious, convenient and healthy alternative.
- If you like to cook, plan ahead and make extras to freeze when your loved one has alternate care available or is taking a nap. Crockpot recipes are easy to put together and they fill your house a delicious aroma as they

simmer. There are endless recipes to choose from online. Start with <https://www.lifeline.philips.com/resources/blog/2014/02/5-easy-crock-pot-meals-for-seniors.html> and pinterest.com.

- Fill your plate with colorful foods – reds, yellow, oranges, purples and greens. A variety of fruits and vegetables have proven to reduce your risk of illness.
- Keep healthy snacks available for times you are too rushed or “on the go”: granola bars, yogurt, nuts, hummus, celery, carrots, and healthy peanut or almond butter.
- Opt for a smoothie instead of a gourmet coffee when you’re out and about.

Reduce stress

March came into New England like a lion, and looks as if it may just actually “leave as a lamb.” These warmer temperatures and longer days will be a welcome relief to anyone experiencing stress. Take time to enjoy the outdoors, and incorporate these suggestions into each day:

- Exercise. Exercise is a natural way for your body to handle stress and anxiety. It releases endorphins to help you feel better and relaxes tense muscles. Choose something you enjoy. Start slowly until you build up your strength and endurance and always consult with a medical professional before beginning a new exercise regime. Stationery home equipment, virtual yoga classes, gardening and even climbing your stairs are great ways to add exercise to your day while still staying close by and able to keep an eye on your loved one. McLean’s Boundless Wellness Director, Kimberly Wright, has an exercise video you can try. Link to: <https://mclean.org/gallery/video-gallery/>

As the warmer weather approaches, take your loved one out for a brief walk around the neighborhood or up and down the driveway.

- Find a creative and emotional outlet. What better way is there to relax than to do something you truly love? Read a good book, watch your favorite show, knit, laugh with a friend on the telephone or meet for a walk. Jigsaw puzzles and adult paint by numbers are also ideas to stay engaged.

- Stay connected with family members and friends so that you don't feel alone and overwhelmed.
- Reduce daily caffeine intake. In moderation, caffeinated beverages can help you feel better. If you consume too much caffeine, it can exaggerate your stress/increase blood pressure and disrupt your sleep pattern.
- Take a break every day, even if it's only 10 minutes alone in the backyard. Clear your head, get some fresh air and hit the refresh button.
- Listen to music. Music has been shown to connect with our emotions and can have a calming and soothing effect on your mood. Your loved one may even enjoy listening to some old favorites, but be sure to incorporate tunes that will give you a lift throughout the day.
- Learn relaxation techniques.

-Take some time to decompress. Try the breathing exercises here along with your loved one They can benefit you both:

<https://www.agingcare.com/articles/breathing-exercises-decrease-stress-and-raise-oxygen-levels-189489.htm>.

- Focus on the positives. It will make the day and your tasks seem more achievable and help put you in a better mindset.
- Practice mindfulness. Be in the present with the task at hand, and enjoy the small things you and your loved one can achieve together.
- Enlist outside support. Online support groups are available through McLean and the Alzheimer's Association. As more of the community gets fully vaccinated COVID-19 restrictions relax, day programs, volunteers and community café programs will resume. For now, reach out to other family members and trusted neighbors and friends to give you some respite during the day. Get professional help if you feel your support system isn't adequate or if you feel overwhelmed. Explore community resources and connect yourself with them. **Call us at 860-658-3941 for some assistance.**

Recognize the signs of caregiver fatigue

All too often, caregivers do forget to take care their own needs first, or simply don't have the time and energy to dedicate. Don't let all of the obstacles prevent you from taking some of the steps described in this article, to protect your physical, mental and emotional wellbeing.

And as you focus on your responsibilities, be careful not to ignore messages your own body may be sending. Watch for these signs of caregiver stress:

- Feeling overwhelmed or constantly worried
- Feeling tired often; not sleeping well
- Fluctuations in weight, either gaining or losing extra pounds
- Becoming easily irritated or angry
- Losing interest in activities you used to enjoy
- Feeling sad
- Having frequent headaches, bodily pain or other physical problems
- Abusing alcohol or drugs, including prescription medications

These are all warning signals to you, indicating it is necessary to seek outside help and support, both to get you on track and to help with the care of your loved one. Start with your trusted medical professional to get their advice.