

10 Things You MUST Do To Stay Healthy and Sane While Caring for Your Aging Parent



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1. TAKE TIME FOR YOURSELF.

Yes, I know what you're thinking - there IS NO time for myself! But you absolutely have to make some, even it's for only an afternoon each week. Enlist family members or friends, check with your local Area-On-Aging for some free respite help or contact a Home Health Agency. Remember what the flight attendants always say: place your oxygen mask on YOURSELF first and then help others in need.

2. AVAIL YOURSELF OF COMMUNITY RESOURCES.

Again, contact your local Area-On-Aging or your community senior center to find out about respite programs, day-care programs, eldercare classes, legal help and support groups. Learn what you can about your loved one's condition so that you'll be able to make better decisions regarding his or her care. Support groups can also be found through your community hospital and are a huge asset to the caregiver.

3. SET ASIDE SPECIFIC TIMES TO WORRY.

I call this the Scarlett O'Hara approach - "I'll think of it all tomorrow...After all, tomorrow is another day." Set aside a specific amount of time each day (5 minutes in a calm, quiet place) and at the end of it, let it go or postpone the worry until next day's "session". Worrying will not solve the problem.

4. BE PROACTIVE IN YOUR "PATIENT'S" CARE.

Learn about your loved-one's condition; attend physician, legal and clinic appointments when possible; enroll in classes (either on-line or in the community). Yes, this requires MORE of your time but ultimately, this will cause less worry.

5. MAINTAIN YOUR CONNECTION WITH THE OUTSIDE WORLD.

Read the newspaper, watch a news program or view the news on the internet. Subscribe to a magazine that offers beautiful photos to peruse (perhaps while your loved one is napping) such as a gardening or architectural journal.

6. DON'T CUT YOURSELF OFF FROM YOUR FRIENDS.

Studies show that caregivers who have social supports (and USE them) are less likely to experience depression, social isolation and illness. If you can't share luncheons or shopping excursions, at least share a phone conversation with a friend two to three times a week.

7. LAUGH OUT LOUD.

Seek out things to laugh about, even if they are seemingly at your "patient's" expense. My father, who suffers from dementia, loves football. During football season, there is a commercial (I think it's a cheese advertisement) where cows (wearing parachutes) are landing on the football field. EVERY SINGLE TIME my father sees this commercial, he shakes his head and says...."Somebody has GOT to do something about that or someone

is going to get hurt!" I have gotten to the point where I start laughing the moment I see the first cow. Other opportunities to laugh can be found in situation comedy shows, a funny movie, or even a simple joke book. But keep in mind that dementia patients, in particular, do not find humor in sit-coms or comedic movies – it is a concept that is difficult for them to grasp. If all else fails, put on some music and dance around the kitchen with the dog!

8. SLOOOOOOW DOWN.

This is good advice even for those who are NOT a caretaker but especially important for those who are. Stop. Take deep breaths - SIGHS are very important. Observe the world around you. Meditation, pilates, tai chi and yoga are all good ways to help yourself slow down. If expense allows, a massage is also an excellent stress-reducer.

9. PURSUE SOME INTERESTS.

Again, yes, I know there is seemingly no time to do this but having some hobbies will help to clear your mind. If you already have a hobby or a sport that interests you, continue to pursue it. If not, consider golf, tennis, knitting, scrapbooking, sewing, journaling, pottery-making, or gardening. Several of these can be done while sitting close to an elder.

10. PRAY.

Almost 75% of caregivers say that they use prayer as a way to cope.* Many questions will arise as you care for your loved-one: Why them, why me? Why would God DO this – he/she has always been a good person. Praying for guidance, strength, patience, kindness, and wisdom are all very helpful.

11. ACCEPT THE SITUATION FOR WHAT IT IS.

Try not to focus on the way things USED to be; try to accept the current situation and think of ways to make the best of it. For instance, while a medical condition may not improve, environments can be manipulated to make life more manageable and enjoyable for the elder and for yourself.

12. GIVE YOURSELF PERMISSION TO CRY.

It's as simple as this - tears reduce tension. Caring for a loved-one can be frustrating, time-consuming, emotionally draining, and just plain heartbreaking! You have every right to cry and you will feel much better after you do.