

Tips for Avoiding Caregiver Burnout

As many as 43.5 million Americans care for older parents, grandparents, spouses, and other older adults.

Some older adults need only a little assistance, such as help with shoveling snow or rides to and from the grocery store. Others need a lot of help with daily activities like eating, bathing, dressing, taking medications, and managing money. Over time, some older adults with increasing medical problems often need significant help from caregivers in performing activities of basic living.

While caring for an older family member can be one of the most rewarding experiences of a lifetime, it can also become stressful at times. This is especially true if the older adult has dementia or needs around-the-clock care. Most caregivers are spouses/partners or children. They may have health problems of their own, have children to care for, work outside the home, or all of these. The additional duties of providing care for an older person can lead to excessive physical or emotional fatigue, called “caregiver burnout.”

It is important to get help before caregiving becomes overwhelming. If you’re caring for an older adult, the American Geriatrics Society’s Health in Aging Foundation suggests the following:

GET INFORMATION

It’s likely that an older person you care for has multiple health problems. They may take quite a few medications and see several different healthcare providers to manage these conditions. This can make managing their care more complicated for you as a caregiver.

It’s helpful to accompany the older adult to their medical appointments to learn about their health problems and how these are likely to change over time. As a first step in learning more, [HealthinAging.org](https://www.healthinaging.org) has a wealth of information on health conditions and needs unique to older adults that can help you be a better informed and prepared caregiver.

HELP YOUR LOVED ONE HELP HIMSELF OR HERSELF

You can make it possible for an older person to keep doing certain things independently by doing things as simple as putting a no-slip seat in the shower or bathtub; installing “grab bars” in the bathroom and near the bed; moving things to lower shelves; or getting easy-grip can openers and other utensils.

ASK TRUSTWORTHY FAMILY, FRIENDS AND NEIGHBORS FOR ASSISTANCE

Ask family and friends for help, and accept help if it is offered. Explain what needs to be done, but try not to criticize if others don’t care for the older person in exactly the same way you would. The important thing is that their needs are met.

TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF, TOO

Take time to eat well, exercise, and relax and enjoy yourself - these are key to avoiding burnout. Look into “respite” programs to allow yourself a short break. Also know the warning signs of depression and get help if needed.

DON'T TAKE IT PERSONALLY

If an older person has dementia or other mental or emotional problems, they may get angry or say hurtful things. Remind yourself that this is because of the illness. Try not to take it to heart.

TALK ABOUT IT

Talking about your experiences and feelings can make caregiving less stressful. Consider joining a caregiver support group in your area.

CONTACT PROFESSIONALS & ORGANIZATIONS THAT ASSIST CAREGIVERS

A wide range of programs, agencies, organizations, and individuals in your community can help you manage the challenges of caring for an older person. This assistance may be free, or available at low cost.

The following agencies and people can help you find the help you need:

ELDERCARE LOCATOR

Visit www.eldercare.gov to search for community services by zip code, city, or topic. Or call 800-677-1116 to speak with an Information Specialist.

You can find your local Area Agency on Aging through the Eldercare Locator. Among other things, an Area Agency on Aging caseworker can visit you and the older person and give you information about different sources for the help you need, how much this help might cost, and how you can get financial help.

OTHER COMMUNITY RESOURCES

Your local United Way and faith-based organizations can also help you find assistance.

Look into a Program of All Inclusive Care for the Elderly (PACE) program in your area, which can provide adult day care and medical care all under one roof.

SOCIAL WORKERS

Social workers at hospitals, clinics, and home health agencies, as well as specially trained geriatric care managers, can help, too. The Aging Life Care Association (www.aginglifecare.org) can provide more information on geriatric care managers. (Note: Insurance usually does not cover the cost of geriatric care manager assistance.)

Among other things, these groups and individuals can help you find the following kinds of help:

■ **FINANCIAL** assistance and advice on paying for the services the older adult needs, including assistance completing paper work.

■ **TRANSPORTATION** to take the older adult shopping or to and from medical appointments.

■ **MEALS** including help preparing meals or having meals delivered.

■ **HOME MEDICAL SERVICES** including visits from house call physicians, registered nurses, private duty nurses, nurses aides, and/or a hospice team, to manage medical problems in the comfort of home.

■ **RESPIRE CARE SERVICES** which send trained helpers to the older adult's home so you can take a break.

■ **RELIABLE "HOME HELPERS"** who can visit the older person for an hour or two at a time to help with bathing, light housekeeping, cooking, and errands.

■ **ADULT DAY CARE** centers where older adults can go for several hours during the day for care supervised by healthcare staff. This care usually includes social programs, recreation, and meals. Special adult day care programs are available for people with dementia, depression, and social problems.