

Avoiding Caregiver Burnout During the Holidays

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Both caregiving for an elderly loved one and preparing for the holidays can come with a lot of joy, but also some unintended stress. As such, it's vital that caregivers don't overload themselves as they balance the day-to-day demands of caring for an older family member with the additional commitments that pop up around the holiday season. So what's the best way to take care of yourself so you don't burn out?

First a little background. Burnout is a state of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion that may be accompanied by a change in attitude, specifically from positive and caring to negative and detached. Sometimes we don't even notice we are getting burned out until others tell us they see the symptoms. The most common symptoms of burnout are increased fatigue, stress, anxiety and depression. Taking care of an older family member can already deplete our stores of energy, and when the holidays come around, there's sometimes nothing left to draw upon. Things that once brought pleasure (baking with the grandkids or decorating the table, for instance) now seem like chores.

Consider these tips to help minimize unnecessary stressors around both caregiving and the holidays:

First, recognize the signs of increased stress. Has your mood changed? Are you often down, irritated and angry? Are your sleep, attention and energy levels disrupted? Remember that stress is a supply and demand problem. It's the result of too many requests and not enough resources (such as time, energy and attention) to meet them.

Second, try shifting your focus to what you can control. We can choose our attitude, and we can choose when we say "yes" or "no." (Every "yes" is a "no" to something else when you are already loaded with responsibilities.) We have learned from scientific studies on the brain that a positive perspective increases energy, productivity and mood, so it's important to focus on what's appreciated and what we are grateful for. In addition, what you agree to do, or not do, can give you a sense of control in situations you often can't direct. You can't control, for example, the course of a family member's condition, but you can control the commitments you make to others and ensure you are not overtaxing yourself. The holidays may be the perfect time to say "yes" to offers of assistance. A friend asking how they can help you out should be thanked and given a job, like picking up medicine or food the next time they go to the store.

And third, try honing the five resiliency skills taught by Al Siebert:

Prioritize safety and self-care. You can't take care of others if you don't first ensure that you are in good shape. Go to the doctor, go for a walk or get out with friends. Each of these things can be important to help sustain your own health and well-being.

Learn breathing and relaxation techniques. Relaxation breathing is a way to calm yourself when you feel particularly stressed or overwhelmed. Inhale through your nose for a count of three, and then exhale for a count of four (as if you were blowing out a candle). Complete four or five of these deep-breathing sequences, and you will be on your way to becoming calm enough to handle the task in front of you.

Communication is key. Talk with friends, family members, a counselor or a spiritual leader. Don't hold everything in. You have more power when you let others carry some of the emotional burden.

Connect with different groups. Different networks of friends and acquaintances, whether they're from the neighborhood, your book club or church group, refresh and renew us. Reach out.

Concentrate on optimism. Look for the good in the world. We feel what we focus on, so why not choose to see the positive qualities in the people around us? It's easy to become inundated with bad news, so we have to work to keep optimistic, positive and grateful for what we have. This state of mind can help re-energize you and improve your attitude immeasurably.

The bottom line is that, to care for a loved one and make it through the joyous but sometimes stressful holiday period, we have to take care of ourselves. In doing so, we are making ourselves more emotionally available to the ones we love and care about.

Now, pass the pumpkin pie, please!

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About Sylvia Nissenboim, counselor and coach for LifeWork Transitions

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