

## Self-Care for Caregivers: 12 Ways Forward

Self-care goals come from asking yourself “What do you find most enjoyable/relaxing” and considering “How can you have this/do this in some version or in a smaller chunk of time?” Think about these questions as you review the following self-care ideas:

- 1) **LOVE YOURSELF** – Compassion means showing empathy, love, and concern to people having difficulty, and self-compassion is simply directing these same emotions towards yourself. Caregiving is hard, yet caregivers are particularly hard on themselves when they are not as nurturing or as self-sacrificing as they expect to be. Caregivers may fear indulging in self-pity, allowing any weakness or failure to occur, or letting negative emotions to take over. Superhero you may be, but super-human, you are not.

What if you treated yourself as you would a friend in a similar situation? Would you not be kind, understanding, encouraging, and allow them all the emotions and feelings that come - without offering judgement? Studies show that practicing self-compassion helps caregivers successfully cope with the challenges they face and prevents caregiver burnout. That makes it essential for you too!

So, put your own needs first for a change and set (and enforce) boundaries. Say “No.” Protect your energy and pamper yourself. Buy yourself flowers, treat yourself to a spa day, or **take a respite break**. Check in with yourself emotionally or list 10 things you like about yourself! See how self-compassion makes a difference!

[www.mindbodygreen.com/0-15295/how-do-you-actually-learn-to-love-yourself.html](http://www.mindbodygreen.com/0-15295/how-do-you-actually-learn-to-love-yourself.html)

[www.self-compassion.org/the-three-elements-of-self-compassion-2/](http://www.self-compassion.org/the-three-elements-of-self-compassion-2/)

- 2) **PLAN THINKING TIME** – Journaling is mostly setting aside time to think. And time to think is vital for good decision-making and for good mental and emotional health. Journaling helps you understand thought patterns, work through difficult emotions, reflect on certain events, or cultivate more gratitude in your everyday life. Journaling is an incredible stress management tool that lessens impact of physical stressors on your health. It is also a way to “check in with yourself” and process your emotions – instead of ignoring them or pushing them away.

Record daily events, write your goals, ambitions, aspirations, and new year resolutions. By keeping them in a journal, you can monitor your progress. Whenever an idea comes to your mind, write it down. Writing down your feelings helps you to “brain-dump” your anxieties, frustrations, and pains on a journal. Also, your brain will store information better when you have written down.

Simply start where you are without trying to manage perfect punctuation, grammar, or spelling, or censoring yourself. This is for you. Make it a regular practice. All you need is a pen and some paper to get started!

[www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/high-octane-women/201201/6-reasons-you-should-spend-more-time-alone](http://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/high-octane-women/201201/6-reasons-you-should-spend-more-time-alone)

**“Journaling helps us externalize what’s going on inside our heads, and it helps us to look at our thoughts more objectively.”**

- 3) **MOVE IT** – Movement is healthy. It releases tension. It lifts your spirits. It helps you recharge. Yet over 60 percent of American adults do not get enough physical activity and over 25 percent of adults are not active at all. Any exercise may feel hard at first, but as you become more consistent, your body gets stronger.

There are many different forms of exercise, so you do not have to commit to the first one you try. Whether yoga, stretching exercises, walking, or dance, put your body in motion - it can even be incorporated with chores like cleaning & organizing your living space! If your movement is limited, roll your neck out or put your hands to work. Maybe just do some breathing exercises – stretch those lungs!

All physical activity counts. The little things that you do every day, like walking the dog or climbing a flight of stairs, do add up and statistically reduce your risk for disease. Purposely add movement into your daily routine or **schedule a respite break** so you can exercise regularly. Try it right now! You will feel better immediately!

[www.sunhealthwellness.org/articles/7-reasons-to-move-every-day](http://www.sunhealthwellness.org/articles/7-reasons-to-move-every-day)

- 4) **MAKE CONNECTIONS** – Loneliness is all too common for caregivers. Connection is more than just being around other people. It means sharing an emotional bond or interacting with people connected to us through mutual experiences, relationship, work, or social groups.

Feelings of isolation and loneliness can be caused just by a change from previous habits and lifestyle. While friends continue their daily routines, you may feel very alone in your caregiving duties, even if never physically alone, and feel no one really understands your situation. One of the best ways to combat isolation and loneliness is to **build some respite time** into your caregiving routine so you can call a friend, take a walk with a neighbor, go out to dinner with family, or join a support group.

At certain stages of life, most people find their social circles start to shrink. Build new connections of all sorts, with people you may not have thought you were originally looking for. Joining activities around things you are interested in is one of the best ways to make new friends. Here are some ideas to get you started!

[www.cmha.ca/blogs/the-importance-of-human-connection](http://www.cmha.ca/blogs/the-importance-of-human-connection)

[www.lifeline.philips.com/resources/blog/2017/11/the-dangers-of-dealing-with-loneliness-as-a-caregiver.html](http://www.lifeline.philips.com/resources/blog/2017/11/the-dangers-of-dealing-with-loneliness-as-a-caregiver.html)

- 5) **BLOCK NOISE** – You are surrounded by noise, both physical and mental, that spikes your blood pressure and heart rate, releases stress hormones, disturbs your sleep, and affects your ability to focus. Imagine dealing with noise when you are under pressure, feeling stressed out, anxious, and in need of healing. Take care of your health by filtering or limiting your exposure to noise.

As a caregiver, being informed can give you a sense of control and help you know what to expect, *unless* you are receiving information at a higher rate than your ability to process it. Reducing the amount of information your brain processes by even 5 percent improves its signals greatly. Noise is anything that gets in the way or blocks those signals. Negative thinking—fear, anxiety, doubt or worry—is the most dangerous type of noise. It sabotages every effort to make positive changes or good decisions.

Reduce your physical and mental noise by leaving the radio off for five minutes or muting TV commercials. Limit your time on social media. Exercising, journaling and meditation can also eliminate noise. Listen to sounds of nature—birds chirping, leaves rustling, waves lapping—to produce the opposite effect of noise. **Use respite breaks** to escape to the quietest place you can retreat to. Fight noise with white noise, especially at night.

[www.thriveglobal.com/stories/the-power-of-blocking-negative-thoughts/](http://www.thriveglobal.com/stories/the-power-of-blocking-negative-thoughts/)

[8 Signs You Need to Take a Break From Social Media – Health Essentials from Cleveland Clinic](#)

**“Silence is one of the most underappreciated tools  
to improve productivity and find healing.”**

- 6) **CHOOSE SLEEP** - Getting the recommended hours of quality sleep makes a huge difference to your wellbeing. Getting it on a consistent basis improves your immune system, mood, and work performance. But getting uninterrupted sleep is often a luxury for caregivers. Age, emotional stress, depression, physical inactivity, chronic disease, and nontraditional or constantly changing sleep/wake cycles are all risk factors for sleep disorders like insomnia. While caregiving responsibilities often take priority, caregivers need to be mindful of their own wellbeing and avoid sacrificing sleep.

Your wellbeing depends upon you meeting basic human needs like sleep. **Respite can temporarily provide care** and companionship, and services available to grocery shop for you, help bathe your loved one and manage their medications, but the responsibility for getting quality sleep falls on you.

Help yourself get a good night’s rest by getting exercise every day, having a regular sleep routine that is calming (e.g., taking a bath or reading), and setting a regular bedtime. Having a room that is dark, quiet and a little cool, and not eating a big meal before going to sleep, makes a big difference. Cut down on caffeine and sodas. Alcohol may help you fall asleep but may cause you to wake up during the night. If you are still feeling sleep-deprived, learn how to nap more successfully!

[www.healthline.com/nutrition/17-tips-to-sleep-better](http://www.healthline.com/nutrition/17-tips-to-sleep-better)  
[www.sleepfoundation.org/sleep-hygiene/napping](http://www.sleepfoundation.org/sleep-hygiene/napping)

- 7) **UPLIFT YOURSELF** – Affirmations are positive statements that help you challenge and overcome negative thoughts. Like repetitive exercises for your physical health, affirmations exercise your mind and outlook. Use affirmations when you want to see a positive change take place in your life. For instance, do you wish that you had more patience, deeper relationships with your friends and colleagues, or a more productive workday?

Even if you love being a caregiver, moments of doubt, discouragement, depression, and fatigue all need a burst of positive thoughts - to help you perform better, calm your nerves, increase your confidence, and mitigate the effects of stress.

Even if you feel like your own aspirations have been put on hold for a time, do not lose sight on yourself as a person. Remind yourself who you are, who you want to be, where you are going, and how you will get there. Find or create affirmations that resonate with you – and repeat them daily. If your affirmations seem only wishful, due to the gap between the positive state you desire and the negative feelings you currently experience, link your affirmations to core values, such as kindness, honesty, or dedication.

[www.joshsteimle.com/influence/7-reasons-why-positive-affirmations-dont-work.html](http://www.joshsteimle.com/influence/7-reasons-why-positive-affirmations-dont-work.html)

**“It’s perfectly fine to use an affirmation you read somewhere that really stuck with you, but creating an affirmation specifically tailored to your goals may work best.”**

- 8) **BREATHE DEEPLY** – Fill your lungs slowly and deeply to recognize how tight your body is. Relax into that breath and count slowly in and as you release it out. It is a calming technique every caregiver needs to know and use. The quality of your breath is directly related to your stress levels. When you are more stressed, your breathing rate becomes faster and shallow in your chest. When you are relaxed, you breathe slower and more deeply towards your belly. By purposely slowing down your breathing rate and taking deeper breaths, you consciously begin to relax.

Even taking just a few minutes each day to breathe deeply can help you achieve greater peace of mind. Just set a timer, close your eyes, and focus on your breathing. How many times have you been angry, stressed, or anxious and someone told you to *just take a deep breath*? Deep breathing is also used in many types of meditation because the calming effect is so significant. The measurable benefits of simple breathing techniques include:

- Reduce stress levels in your body
- Lower your heart rate
- Lower your blood pressure
- Improve diabetic symptoms
- Reduce depression

- Better manage chronic pain
- Better regulate your body's reaction to stress and fatigue
- Reduce the possibility of burnout for caregivers

[www.studyfinds.org/5-minute-breathing-workout/](http://www.studyfinds.org/5-minute-breathing-workout/)  
[www.mindful.org/a-five-minute-breathing-meditation/](http://www.mindful.org/a-five-minute-breathing-meditation/)

- 9) **DO “YOU” MORE** - To best support your loved one, you must be strong and actively present, so be sure to **schedule respite time** for yourself to relax and recuperate. Continue doing things you love like reading, cooking, or hanging out with friends. To avoid burnout, talk to other family members and friends and ask them for help.

How ‘productive’ is having fun? Doing something you enjoy is great for your mental health. Interesting activities can boost your mood, get your mind off whatever is distressing you and help you build up some momentum. Once you get going, you might be surprised at how quickly your wellbeing starts to shift. If you have not done a particular activity for a while, it might take a little while to get into it again. Just persist – it will build up over time.

If you have been down, you might not be inspired to do very much right now. Give things a try even when you do not feel like it because your motivation often comes *after* you have started something. Give yourself permission to do something you will enjoy. Make things, hang out, chill out, connect to nature, get moving, and learn stuff!

[www.headspace.org.au/blog/finding-activities-you-enjoy/](http://www.headspace.org.au/blog/finding-activities-you-enjoy/)

- 10) **ASK FOR HELP** – Before stress makes you sick, ask friends, neighbors, or family members to help temporarily with some of the work of care. Asking for help does not mean that you have given up on your loved one or no longer love them. Are you not asking for help because...

- You do not know what kind of help to ask for?
- You do not want to bother anyone?
- You feel guilty if you do not do everything for the person in your care?
- You are afraid the answer will be “No?”

To be fair, do not ask at the last minute. Let people know you will need help a few days ahead of time so they can adjust their schedule. Explain why you need the help. It is easier for someone to help you when they know exactly what you need. Of all the tasks you could have them do while you are away, ask only for what you know the person can give. Find out what each person can and is willing to do. Give them a chance to try. Be satisfied with “Good Enough.”

Keep a stack of index cards on you for whenever someone asks what they can do to help. Let them pick one or two, and get it scheduled! Some ideas might be to pick up groceries, come over to play a game, watch a movie or enjoy lunch with your loved one, stop by to help with a household chore or to mow the lawn, bring you a home-cooked meal, or just send a “thinking of you” text!

While you do things or **take a respite break**, professional care and volunteer help may also be available to keep your loved one safe, engaged, and provided with assistance.

[www.amadaseniorcare.com/2020/01/family-caregivers-finding-the-courage-to-ask-for-help-when-you-need-it/](http://www.amadaseniorcare.com/2020/01/family-caregivers-finding-the-courage-to-ask-for-help-when-you-need-it/)

- 11) **LEARN “PAIN”** – Have you ever heard people say they would not want to change something hard they experienced because it had meaning, resulted in growth, was a valuable lesson learned, or ultimately opened opportunities they had not foreseen? It is a beautiful moment to realize that a personal sacrifice of time and effort allowed you to respond to someone else’s true need. Your sacrifice became a hopeful, healing message of “you are not alone.”

When you think about pain, you automatically think of physical pain. Most people are not aware of the fact that emotional pain shares the same pathways in your brain as physical pain and your body registers it in the same way. Pain demands to be felt and that you tune in to what is going on inside of you. Ignoring pain from any source makes as much sense as ignoring a broken leg.

While striving to provide relief to others, caregivers can learn from their own pain, too. Pain forces us to seek support from the outside that we may not necessarily think we need. While realizing we are not invincible, pain powerfully forces us to stand up for ourselves and gives us a chance to be our own best friend.

[The Importance of Pain | Greater Good \(berkeley.edu\)](#)

- 12) **MAKE IT “ROUTINE”** – When life seems chaotic, routines are great stress relievers even when circumstances are challenging. The more “normal” the day seems, the less stress on your stress control systems. Having a routine can be helpful at any time, particularly if you are trying to establish self-care habits, but these routines can be particularly important when aspects of caregiving make your life feel uncertain.

A good place to start with creating a new routine is to set wake-up and bedtimes, as well as meal and activity times. Every time you have to make a decision, you are adding some stress to your life. While you cannot do away with decision-making completely, creating regular rhythms can take much of the guesswork out of your day. Complete daily tasks at the same time each day. Carve out specific time for a task and you will not have to wonder about how to fit it onto your growing to-do list. Remove as many variables and excess choices as possible.

Remember the parable of the rocks and sand. Make sure the bigger, more important things, **like regular respite breaks**, are scheduled first and fit the smaller tasks and activities in around them. It will amaze you what you can fit in!

[www.verywellmind.com/the-importance-of-keeping-a-routine-during-stressful-times-4802638](http://www.verywellmind.com/the-importance-of-keeping-a-routine-during-stressful-times-4802638)