

Taking Care of Yourself

Caregivers expend tremendous amounts of physical, mental, emotional and spiritual energy while providing care for someone who needs it. It is vital that we care for ourselves at least as well as we care for others. Multiple considerations come into play when serving people, especially those who are close to our age, partners, friends or children who are facing their mortality. Their search for meaning and quality in life often prompts a similar exploration of our own. Recognizing and dealing with our own needs may be daunting but one way or another our own issues will demand attention.

Helping someone you love may strengthen or renew a bond. If the person you are caring for has a terminal illness, there is no time to waste. Intimate relationships can be formed very quickly with those who come into their lives to provide care. This inevitably evokes a sense of personal vulnerability to disease and death and forces caregivers to examine our lives for meaning and fulfillment.

It is often difficult to witness a person who was vigorous and healthy deteriorate to someone needing help walking, bathing, eating and dressing. Because of the intensive time and sense of personal commitment the caregiver may utilize a variety of coping mechanisms. Some people cope by denying their feeling and seek methods to emotionally distance themselves. Others may completely identify with the ill person, taking on their experience to the point of having "sympathy pains". Finding a balance between these extremes is imperative.

Seeking balance is an individual quest. It is important to recognize that there is something beyond feeling helpless and overwhelmed. There are a variety of support services available which provide hands on physical care, respite care and emotional support. Taking advantage of help frees designated caregivers for time for ourselves. Accepting help may be difficult because it requires relinquishing time and control.

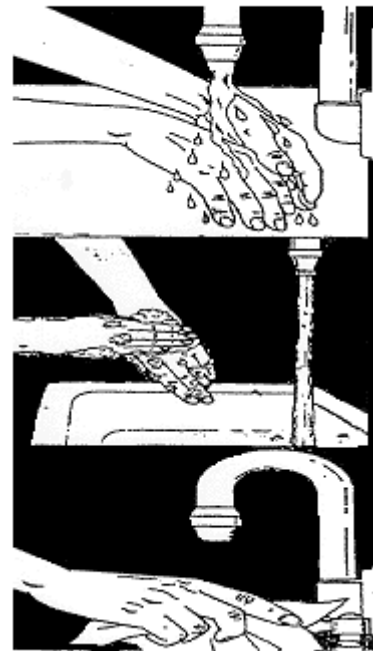
Taking a 3 to 4 hour break daily will provide an opportunity for self care activities. The following suggestions are offered for your consideration:

- physical exercise, i.e., swimming, walking, bicycling
- talking with friends
- attending support groups
- participating in counseling
- taking or planning a vacation
- attending a class
- artistic pursuit, i.e., hobbies, music, writing
- spiritual counseling

The key to maintaining mental and physical balance is to provide an opportunity to nurture ourselves. Caring for ourselves gives us the stamina to meet the needs of others. Remember that grief is a cyclic experience. It is possible to be anywhere in the cycle at any given time. So, be gentle and considerate of yourself.

Hand Washing

Hand Washing



It's a basic skill that most of us figure we have down pat. But when you are caring for people weakened by HIV or other infectious diseases, PROPER hand washing is critical for two reasons:

1. It helps protect your patient or loved one from whatever germs you are carrying.
2. It prevents spreading the infection.

EQUIPMENT

- Liquid Soap (preferably)
- Clean, dry paper towels
- Fingernail Brush
- Warm running water

WHEN TO WASH YOUR HANDS

- Before and after client contact
- After using the toilet
- After removal of gloves and/or other protective clothing
- After contact with any wastes, body fluid or contaminated items
- Before eating
- Before preparing food
- After blowing nose, sneezing, etc.
- After cleaning an area
- After smoking

PROCEDURE

1. Wet hands under RUNNING water. Keep wrists lower than elbows. Leave water running throughout procedure.
2. Lather soap in a circular motion, Rub hands together using friction. Rub together at least 10 seconds, and longer if you touched body fluids. Scrub between fingers and entire surface of hands and wrists.
3. Scrub under fingernails with soap and fingernail brush.
4. If using bar soap, after washing rinse the soap and drop it in soap dish without touching the dish.
5. Dry hands with clean paper towel.
6. Use the paper towel to turn off the faucet.

Identifying Burnout

Why do caregivers suffer from emotional and physical burnout? We often seem to have no trouble diving into all of the physical and emotional challenges we face. When faced with the day-to-day labors of care giving, we often go on auto-pilot and do what needs to

be done. What does not come automatically is the realization that we can't do it by ourselves, and the willingness to ask for help.

Burnout results from excessive stress. As caregivers we often fail to recognize the early signs of burnout because we are so focused on caring for our loved one. Signs of burnout may vary from individual to individual, and their intensity depends on many factors, including your personality, age, health and circumstances.

- **Physical**—symptoms can include continual exhaustion, deficient sleep, susceptibility to illness, poor personal hygiene, frequent accidents and others.
- **Emotional**—symptoms can include impatience, irritability, forgetfulness, numbness or inability to experience enjoyment and others.
- **Coping**—symptoms can include denial of burnout symptoms, increase in compulsive/addictive behaviors, withdrawal or reduction of social contacts, discontinued hobbies or recreational activities, involvement in few activities outside of care giving.

Preventing Burnout

The first strategy for preventing burnout is becoming aware of the sources and symptoms of stress. By paying attention to the following areas, you can maintain your physical and emotional balance, minimize your risk of burnout and be more effective and fulfilled as a caregiver.

- **Awareness**—review the symptoms and sources of your stress. What can you do to change the aspects of care giving that you find most stressful? What coping patterns would you like to change?
- **Attitude**—what are you seeking in care giving? What are your priorities? What do you get from care giving? How do you measure success/fulfillment. Have you accepted your limitations? Where can you "let go" more? What aspects of care giving can you delegate?
- **Support**—it is important to acknowledge and express your feelings about your care giving, and other aspects of your life. Do you have someone to whom you can talk to about your feelings? What kinds of support do you most need from them: practical, emotional, spiritual? Be willing to seek support.
- **Respite**—do you regularly take breaks away for care giving? Do you practice relaxation techniques? These are critically important for recharging your care giving batteries. Other types of respite include hobbies, friends and activities not related to care giving.
- **Exercise**—regular physical, aerobic activity is an important way to work out tensions caused by care giving, and make sure that you are the best physical condition possible to support your care giving.
- **Self-Nurturing**—in order to take care of yourself well you must acknowledge and honor your work as a caregiver, and take good care of yourself. Eat a balanced diet. Do something enjoyable every day. Make your home as comfortable as possible. Get enough rest. Ask for help. Laugh every day.