



Caring for yourself when caring for others

Caring for others, whether they are children, aging parents, or even a partner with complex needs, often means putting them first ahead of yourself. And even though playing such a compassionate role can be rewarding, the demands are often physically and emotionally challenging.

Caregiving challenges

Caregivers tend to prioritize others and put their own needs last, risking exhaustion and ultimately burnout.

“When you are pulled in many different directions and you find yourself worrying about your loved ones or organizing your to-do list, you miss out on things that you might want to do for yourself,” says Carmel Watson, marriage and family therapist and workplace well-being strategist at Manitoba Blue Cross. “This causes you to be in a constant state of exhaustion, which is one of the key factors contributing to burnout.”

Another common challenge caregivers experience is feeling isolated.

“Most caregivers find themselves feeling left out as they often have to say no to social events due to someone needing their time and energy,” Watson says.

Not only does this create distance in relationships – it can trigger an emotional reaction that “nobody understands” you or your caregiving commitments.

Close social connections are crucial for our mental health and when we feel lonely or isolated, our mental health suffers.

“Another thing to note is that your relationship with the person you are now taking care of has changed. You may feel unable

to talk to them about your feelings, even though they may be your partner or parent – someone you used to share everything with.

It’s normal to feel angry, guilty, and even resentful at times because life can very much feel overwhelming and unfair.



There can also be a sense of grief over what life used to be and an acknowledgement that things may not return to that same place,” Watson explains.

Having a wide range of emotions about caregiving is common and ultimately human. “Finding someone safe and comfortable to talk to about these feelings is important. That might be a friend who is going through

something similar, it might be with a support group, or it might be with a therapist,” Watson says.

Not addressing those feelings can start to have a negative impact on other areas of your life.

Stepping up self-care

“We are not going to be of any help to others if we become burnt out or sick ourselves. Starting to add in a little self-care with the goal to reenergize is for everyone’s benefit,” Watson says.

A good way to carve out time for yourself, even if only for a few hours, is to reach out to others to share duties.

“If you’re an exhausted parent, connect with other parents and start the conversation about sharing some duties to give each other a break. Can you take turns driving each other’s kids to activities, so the other parent gets a break?”

If you’re caring for parents or a partner, ask a family member to step in or consider using a home care program so you can take time for yourself.

Once the arrangements are in place, it’s important to be intentional with your time. Self-care looks different for everyone, and what you do is up to you. Try to find activities that you enjoy and that leave you feeling recharged and refreshed. However, if you find you are using the time to catch up on chores or other responsibilities, you aren’t truly taking the break you need.

“You deserve this time and taking it is not a selfish act. You will quickly notice that you have more energy, you will be less reactive, and you will be able to handle stress better when you’ve built in some time for self-care,” Watson affirms.

Seeking support

Watson hopes that caregivers reach out for support as early as possible but stresses that it’s never too late to ask for help.

Signs that you may need to seek support or professional help are:

- **Noticing a decline in your own health:** Are you getting sick more than usual or feeling run down? Are you dramatically losing or gaining weight?
- **Feeling increasingly anxious, irritable, or low:** Do you find these emotions are present for an extended period and are impacting your interactions and sleep?
- **Being isolated:** Are you avoiding contact with others and starting to isolate yourself?

Remember that you can’t care for others if you aren’t caring for yourself. Maintaining your own health, physically and mentally, is vital to being a resilient and effective caregiver and leading a more balanced lifestyle.

For more information call the Employee Assistance Centre at 204.786.8880 or toll-free 1.800.590.5553 or visit mb.bluecross.ca. For the Deaf, hard-of-hearing and speech-impaired community, our EA centre can receive VRS calls.



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