

Take Five: Caregiving Tips for Busy Lives

If you're like most family caregivers, your life was plenty complicated before you began providing care for a parent, spouse, or other loved one. You already balanced a career with a full family and social life. Now you're taking on another job—one you probably didn't train for or even necessarily expect.

Because its demands are subject to your loved one's changing needs, the emotional and physical stress of caregiving can overtake your life quicker than any corporate job. That's why it's so important to set limits on the time and energy you devote to it.

Many caregivers feel that if they don't give themselves over completely to a loved one's care, they're letting that person down. But by far the most common obstacle to providing good care is neglecting to take care of yourself first.

Here are five simple things you can do to fit caregiving into a full, healthy life:

- **Give yourself a break.** Schedule your caregiving hours as formally as possible, include regular breaks. If you take breaks only when you feel you "deserve" one, you'll probably wait until you've already run yourself ragged.
- **Accept help when it's offered.** When you share caregiving duties, you're not shirking your responsibilities, you're giving someone else a chance to feel good about helping your loved one (and you). If professional assistance is an option, remember that its cost is an investment in your well-being.
- **Involve your employer.** Don't try to pretend that your caregiving and professional responsibilities have no effect on each other. You might be surprised by the lengths your employer will go to accommodate your caregiving demands, including flexible scheduling and support and training programs.
- **Actively protect your health.** Start taking better care of yourself before small problems become debilitating. Back problems are especially common for caregivers who are unaccustomed to the lifting it often requires. Yoga is one technique many caregivers use to stay mobile and decrease stress.
- **Connect with others.** Don't wait until a crisis develops to start drawing upon the strength and experience of others who've been there. You're part of a very large community of caregivers. Find a support group in your area, and look into the many forums available online. Never underestimate the power of a good laugh.

Even more than such methods, your health and happiness as a caregiver depend on your chosen point of view. Instead of looking at your complicated life as a neverending juggling act, consider the virtues of a life made up of distinct parts, in which your well-being and sense of worth draw upon all of them but aren't dependent on any of them.