



WSL Sistah Self-Care:

Self-Care Tips for Elder Caregivers

By Jacci Thompson-Dodd, MA, MSSS

Much of providing care to our loved ones is our desire to honor them, preserving their privacy, dignity and independence. No matter what the care setting—in town or across the country—caregivers often realign their entire lives rising to the occasion.

So often care for ourselves takes a back seat to our responsibilities of caring for others. Devotion to our aging, ailing loved ones can pull us out of our own center. The tireless hours—sometimes years—without relief takes its toll.



In fact, according to the Family Caregiver Alliance:

- Between 40 to 70 percent of caregivers have clinically significant symptoms of depression, with approximately one quarter to one half of these caregivers meeting the diagnostic criteria for major depression.
- More than one-fifth of caregivers are exhausted when they go to bed at night, and many feel they cannot handle all their caregiving responsibilities.
- Caregivers report chronic conditions (including heart attack/heart disease, cancer, diabetes and arthritis) at nearly twice the rate of noncaregivers.
- Women who spend nine or more hours a week caring for an ill or disabled spouse increase their risk of heart disease two-fold.
- Elderly spousal caregivers (age 66-96) who experience caregiving-related stress have a 63 percent higher mortality rate than noncaregivers of the same age.

The cost for caregivers is not only physical and emotional. It's also financial. Caregivers often reduce work hours; forgoing promotions, or even quit jobs to accommodate their caregiving responsibilities. Having done so, the financial future of caregivers can be uncertain, with dramatically reduced retirement benefits—if any at all. The heartbreaking reality is that everyone suffers when chronic illness strikes.

We've assembled several Self-Care tips to help give caregivers relief:

Tip #1: Respite

Taking a break from caregiving responsibilities is the single most important thing a caregiver can do to maintain his/her mental and physical health. Scheduling time for yourself at regular intervals is essential for releasing stress and restoring energy. At a minimum, find time each day to get some fresh air, stretch, and eat a proper meal.

Tip #2: Share the Care

Getting time away from caregiving chores can be nearly impossible if you are the primary caregiver. That's why it is so important to Share the Care. Navigating through the challenges of caregiving can be a nurturing group process, bringing together trusted friends, family, neighbors, co-workers, and members of your spirit community.

Share the Care is an outstanding program for creating a sustainable, team care plan. It recognizes the care needs of the ailing person as well as their caregiver, and surrounds them a well choreographed, organized, flexible system of care. The process of building a care team is itself an opportunity to nourish both the infirmed and the caregiver.

Tip #3: Maintain Good Nutrition

Snatching bites of fast foods between care shifts is a recipe for depleting your immune system, zapping your strength, and clogging your spirit. Instead of buying convenience foods, consider buying small appliances that make healthier food options more convenient.

For example a crock pot allows minimal prep and monitoring time, and offers the maximum slow-cooked goodness of hardy soups and vegetables, stewed meats, beans legumes and whole grains. A Foreman Grill can bring wholesome veggies, meats, and fish to your table in minutes. Both cooking methods require very little clean up, saving time, money, and stress for caregivers.

When it comes to snacks, having fresh fruits and nuts are a high-energy, nutritious alternative to candy and chips. Wholesome grocery shopping can be a regular assignment for the Share the Care team.

Tip #4: Pay Attention to your Body

Staying healthy is the best asset a caregiver has in the daunting task of elder care. So it is imperative to heed the messages your body is giving you. Headaches, chest pains, blurred vision, and sudden weakness can be warning signs of a serious illness.

Pace yourself. Protect yourself. The heavy lifting required for transferring someone from bed to chair is demanding on your back and joints. Wear supportive braces for back, knees and hand as needed to fortify your joints.

Be sure to keep your own medical appointments too. And if any unfamiliar symptoms arise, don't ignore them. Seek whatever medical attention you need in a timely fashion.

Resources

These few Self-Care Tips are just a start with healthier caregiving. There are many resources for caregiver support, starting with YOU! The best source for battle-tested caregiver tips is the wonderful community of sistahs in our WHOLE family. We've started a blog called [WHOLE Express](#) where you can send in your tips and comments. Join us there and let's keep the healing energy flowing.

More information on Share the Care™ is available at www.sharethecare.org.

For referrals to caregiver support services including information, assistance, counseling, respite, home modifications or assistive devices, support groups, and family counseling,¹ contact the Family Caregiver Alliance, National Center of Caregiving at www.caregiver.org.

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¹ Fact Sheet: Women and Caregiving: Facts and Figures. Family Caregiver Alliance. <http://www.caregiver.org>