

## Caring for the Caregiver

As our population continues to age, and medical technology grants us the ability to have family and friends in our lives for a longer length of time, many of us have begun to care for someone. While taking care of someone can be rewarding in many ways, it can also be a difficult and challenging task. The family member or friend may no longer be the person you once knew, which can evoke a host of emotions. Providing assistance—sometimes continual assistance—can be emotionally and physically draining. There are financial costs as well: caregiving is often unpaid, and medical and health related expenses can be high.

Experiencing some or all of the above in addition to the responsibilities of your own home and work life can be overwhelming. You may feel like you are drowning and may question how long you can sustain all that you have on your plate. However, if you don't take care of yourself, you will have nothing left to offer someone else. Consider a few of the following suggestions on how to take care of the caregiver, you.

**Recognize that you are experiencing a number of losses.** Some of you may be dealing with a family member or friend who has lost physical or cognitive abilities. It can be particularly difficult when the person may not know who you are. A sense of interpersonal loss can be felt. You are also experiencing a loss of your own free time. Pastimes previously enjoyed may now be impossible to squeeze into your schedule. These losses can affect your own mental health and how well you adjust. Locating a caregiver's support group, potentially with a specific focus on the condition of the person you are caring for, can help facilitate the grieving process and provide assistance in moving toward acceptance of where the person is today. For a list of support groups in the area, go to [www.caregiver.com](http://www.caregiver.com) and click on *Regional Resources*.

**Give yourself and your family member time to adjust.** If you have recently taken on the role of caregiver, allow yourself time to learn about the needs of the person. You may be experiencing their changes along with them and you may not feel fully prepared for the new responsibilities. The website [www.caregivermag.com](http://www.caregivermag.com) has a comprehensive list of organizations you can contact for additional information or support.

As your family member begins to lose their independence, they may be experiencing a range of emotions which can be difficult to express. Be prepared for their mood swings and sometimes unpredictable behavioral outbursts. Recognize that you may also experience a range of emotions. You may feel uncomfortable attending to the physiological needs of your friend or family member, or experience frustration or helplessness. Remember that both of you are learning from experience; be patient with their process and with your own.

**Simplify your life and recognize your limits.** What are the things in your life that complicate matters? How can you better approach them so you have a less demanding life? Say no to professional, familial, and social functions that are unnecessary or unrewarding. Be realistic about what is feasible, and don't feel guilty if you can't do it all. You are not superhuman.

**Ask for help.** With help, you can take a break from the caregiver role, focus some attention on yourself, and potentially feel rejuvenated when resuming your caregiving. It is important to keep others in your life informed of the increased responsibilities you are currently juggling so that they may be better equipped to help you. For example, your work may be able to assist you in arranging your schedule around appointments, or friends may help with errands or meals. Other family members and friends may not know how to assist and need direction for when to step in. Do not hesitate to ask for help.

Also, consider utilizing other outside resources that can assist with the care for your friend or family member. The Illinois Department on Aging (<http://www.state.il.us/aging>) provides assistance programs for individuals over the age of 60. Through their Senior Helpline (1-800-252-8966) they can link you to resources such as homemaker services, adult day care, long term care, legal services, transportation, medication assistance, employment and nutrition services. For resources to assist your friend or family member with HIV/AIDS, see *resources* at [www.howardbrown.org](http://www.howardbrown.org). Contact The Counseling Center if you need assistance locating additional resources.

**Take time for yourself.** The stress of caring for others can increase your likelihood of suffering from a physical or emotional health problem. Most jobs grant you time off for vacation and holidays; however, caregivers seldom get vacation days to rest and reenergize. Remember to exercise, eat healthy, get rest, stay connected to your own interests, use relaxation techniques, or journal. Try to increase your involvement in pleasant activities. Make a list of things you enjoy and do something on your list every other day.

It is important to take time for yourself to rejuvenate and avoid burnout. Some signs that you may be experiencing burnout include: irritability, isolation, fatigue, insomnia, apathy, appetite changes, and increased substance use. If you notice changes in how you are interacting with the world and coping with stress, consider talking with a professional at the Counseling Center.

**Finally, give yourself recognition.** Take a moment to recognize all you are doing for the person who may be unable physically or cognitively to thank you for all you do. If you are not assuming the role of primary caregiver, be careful not to diminish your role in the caregiving process. You can still be an integral part of the situation, and your support helps both the one being cared for and the primary caregiver. Embrace the communal life of maintaining relationships across the generations. Relish the rewarding components of caregiving that allow you to feel useful, important, and competent while helping another human being live life more comfortably.