

STRATEGIES FOR CAREGIVERS

The opportunity and choice to become a caregiver can be rewarding but is not without challenges and potential stressors. Cancer caregiving is often a long-term commitment- whether the patient recovers to independence, or their condition continues to deteriorate. While balance is a commonly used word, it is rarely captured. Ensure that as you care for others, you care for your own physical and emotional wellbeing.

I have chosen to be an advocate as a healthcare professional and in my own personal relationships with patients I'd like to share some ACTIONABLE steps to help you deal with the emotional, practical and physical demands of being an advocate and caregiver....



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TOP 15 STRATEGIES



1. Self-care is not selfish: it is a necessity that will enhance the situation for both you, the patient, and those that surround you.



2. Caregiving is a Choice: Acknowledge that caregiving is a choice, a brave one because it can become weighty. Objectively examine your true motivation(s) for the commitment and let them be a source of motivation when things become hard. **Sometimes you might have to remind yourself that you “get” the opportunity to take care of that person, you don’t have to.** Being cared for is a privilege not afforded to everyone.



3. It Takes a Village: Welcome Assistance of others while respecting the wishes of the patient. People often want to help and utilizing your “village” can ease your burden. Accept that meal or help with the trash bins or someone offering to pick up necessities for you or the patient. Delegate tasks that would be most helpful to you. Utilize annual memberships and mail-order services that deliver items/eliminate trips to stores- get what you need for the patient and for your home too. Time saved can be worth more than money saved.



4. Allow for Healthy Boundaries: Boundaries are healthy for both you and the person you are caring for. You can offer but don't insist on trying to meet every need for the patient. Most patients want to maintain some sense of control over their lives and maintain components of their identity, even when their capacity is diminished. Allowing them to participate even in the smallest aspects of their care fosters dignity. Create “margin” or room around for the patient to be alone if they desire it. Ask them if they would appreciate some private time. Agree upon a specific amount of time for them to be in solitude. If there are significant safety issues, perhaps stay in the home or use a camera or phone for backup communication and put necessities well within reach.



5. Give Yourself Grace: Leave room...for missteps, mistakes. You both have taken on new roles in an often-unpredictable situation. Give yourself and the patient “grace.” Don’t underestimate the value of creating a more comfortable, safe or loving environment for someone on a cancer journey!



6. Take Pride in Yourself: Look for the ways that caregiving has brought you closer to the person you are caring for or your wider family/community. You’ll often find you have more strength than you gave yourself credit for. Find droplets of joy in the middle of the storm.



7. Fill Your Cup So You Can Pour into Others: You cannot pour from an empty cup. We have all heard examples of this practice when we fly and we are told to place our ‘mask on first’ before attempting to assist others! Ensure you to are engaging in self-care- ensure you are eating regularly/well, physically moving YOUR body (intentionally take a walk)- not just the activity involved in care. The smallest of luxuries like taking a bath instead of a hurried shower, having a manicure, or your enjoying a favorite treat can, reduce stress and palpably change your mood long after the activity is over.



8. Monitor, Manage & Maintain Your Health: Keep up to date on your scheduled maintenance- mammograms/bone density/prostate/skin exams, immunizations/vaccinations, and chronic disease management is key to being able to maintain your role as a caregiver. Utilize waiting time, it may benefit you to schedule your tests while the patient is having longer treatments/tests or in the same facility.



9. Embrace Your Beliefs: Stay connected to your power or belief system. Be intentional about tapping into what has sustained, comforted, or fueled you in time of stress in the past...be it faith, spirituality, or rituals (yoga, breathing exercises, music, time in nature). Make time for it-even if it means closing the bathroom door or sitting in the car to have a few minutes to refocus on yourself. Having a faith community and leaning into them is a blessing that can help you across all areas of your life and as a caregiver.



10. Allow Yourself to Feel: Be still long enough to ‘notice what you are noticing. Don’t negate those feelings even if they seem selfish or negative. Fear, anger, hurt, disbelief, even unexplained optimism in the face of a life altering diagnosis are all valid and worthy of being addressed.



11. Make Memories: Making meaningful memories that can be reflected on with fond memories is a way to celebrate our life and the lives of others, it is a timeless reminder, a way to capture special moments. Engaging in activities that aren’t necessarily related to caregiving can reframe the situation-record or make a favorite recipe from the patient and print or share it with family, curate a playlist of favorite songs and posting it on your favorite streaming service.



12. Respect Your Life: You have responsibilities that extend beyond your role as caregiver. Continue to nurture your own garden- spouses, children, pets, faith community, work commitments. Resentment can easily build when other aspects of your life are repeatedly neglected. Make an effort to show up at times when you are often committed to caregiving- if you miss dinner with your family or kid's activities- arrange for a substitute and be PRESENT. It can reenergize you and your relationships and help you be a better caregiver and handle day to day pressures. Prioritize activities that spark joy or provide moments of mental respite for you- pick up an old or new hobby – maybe even something that you can do while providing care. Crocheting, puzzles, caring for plants or revisiting a tv series your never finished come to mind- you can even travel the world virtually or learn just about how to do anything for free on YouTube.







13. Embrace Professional Support: Yield to other's areas of expertise Allow aides, nurses, family members to do their jobs. Not everyone will do things exactly the way you would. Be willing to let go of some of control you've created. Consider the outcome - if the patient safely gets a bath/ is groomed or the home is "clean" and YOU are able to have a few hours for self-care: celebrate a win!



14. Assess and Re-assess your Capacity: Consider if you want to or can remain in the role of primary caregiver. Perhaps you NEED a formal break before you BREAK. A few days or weekend can be rejuvenating. Talk with the patient, other family/village members or volunteers who might be able to step in for a defined time period. Ask healthcare providers and/or their insurer about the availability of respite care - this is usually time-limited, paid care in or out of the home services often provided through an agency or at skilled nursing facilities or adult day centers.



15. Care for the Caregiver: Seek the listening ear of a supportive friend or family member when you feel overwhelmed or that you may be under appreciated by the person in your care/ other family members. Serious illnesses can bring underlying hurts to the surface and create an unhealthy environment. It is okay to seek positive reinforcement from someone who cares for you. Many cancer centers and houses of faith offer support groups for caregivers. As well, many employers/insurers offer access to licensed professional counselors or virtual care wherever you are via Apps like Headspace or Better Help. Don't suffer caregiver burnout in silence.

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