

The Age Sage

Dear Age Sage,

I have been the primary caregiver for my spouse whose illness has progressed in the past year. I am tired and my doctor has said that I should take better care of myself. I feel resentful and angry that our retirement years have turned out this way, yet feel guilty about doing things that bring me pleasure. How do I balance care giving and care for myself.

Signed,
Too Tired to Care

Dear Tired:

Your doctor is right. When another person depends on us for care it can stimulate big changes (stress) in our lives. Whether you are care giving for a short period of time or long term, you have to plan how you will take care of yourself during the process. We all have an incredible survival instinct during times of stress (fight or flight response) and we surprise ourselves with how much we can do, but this response is designed to take us through crisis, not cope with stress long term. At some point, in a high pressured care giving environment, coping demands will exceed coping skills and the ability to handle stress deteriorates and burn-out occurs. Failing physical and mental health follows. Being tired is one sign that you are approaching burn-out and learning good coping skills now will benefit you and your spouse for the long term.

Having feelings of anger, resentment, fear, guilt and depression are natural. As you care for another, you need someone to care about you. Find someone with whom you can safely discuss your feelings and your needs. It may be a friend, counselor, pastor or support group. Having someone hear and acknowledge our pain helps us resolve issues and feel heard. At the same time, don't forget your sense of humor. Just because a situation is serious it doesn't mean you can't laugh. Laughter is a healer and great stress relief.

Caregivers tend to make sure their loved one is well nourished while forgetting to eat themselves. So many caregivers snack between tasks and drink caffeine to battle fatigue. Eating well and exercising are usually the last things thought about after a long day of responsibilities. Let others help you. Friends and relatives could stock your freezer with pre-cooked meals that can be easily warmed up. People truly want to help, but only know what they can assist with when the caregiver is able to express his/her needs.

Physical activity is often emotionally healing. Jogging, swimming or bicycling can provide an outlet for frustration and long walks can provide a connection with nature which can have calming effect. Rest is also essential. Lack of sleep contributes to carelessness and decreased tolerance for frustration and depression. Take advantage of free time to nap, read or just sit quietly.

Know your limitations, strengths and weaknesses and ask for help with the things that are beyond your scope. Many women taking care of spouses are taking care of financial concerns/ issues, car and yard maintenance, or any other of the tasks that the spouse may have handled. Friends, family, home care organizations and community visiting nurse associations all offer assistance for a caregiver to get some free time to balance physical, emotional, spiritual needs.

TIP:

Caregivers seem to fall into two categories: those who act out of pity and ignore their own needs, and those who act out of compassion and recognize the importance of caring for themselves as well.

Until next month,

The Age Sage

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