



Dealing with caregiver stress in a COVID-19 world

There have always been both pleasures and pressures in caring for older or infirm family members. In a world with COVID-19, the upsides are still there—time with someone who may have cared for you in the past and the satisfaction of giving back. However, the stresses can be magnified by new worries and gaps in the usual systems of support.

Fear of serious illness or death from COVID-19 is a new reality, and because that risk is higher for older people, caregivers tend to live with a baseline level of worry during the pandemic that they didn't have before. That worry may be compounded by other factors, such as the following:

- **Social isolation**—Minimizing in-person social contacts is one of the key recommendations to control the spread of the disease. Since social support is critical to maintaining resilience and emotional strength for both caregivers and people receiving care, this can set up a conflict. How do you find the balance between disease prevention and emotional needs—for your older relative and for you?
- **Limits on elder services**—Clear evidence of the special vulnerability of older and infirm people to COVID-19 has also led to cutbacks in some of the services older people and their families have long relied on—community meal

programs, adult day care, and respite care, to name a few. With new limits on the availability of these types of services and the narrowing of options to share care, caregivers have taken on a bigger share of the care burden.

- **Separation from older relatives**—Many assisted living or nursing home facilities have adopted strict, no-visitor policies, leaving family members shut out from physical contact. Unable to connect with their older relative in person, they worry about the effects of social isolation on their loved one or if all of the care their relative needs is being provided by the facility's staff.
- **Loved ones experiencing increased stress**—Loved ones who are now unable to leave their home may be dealing with frustration due to canceled activities, lifestyle restrictions, or dependency on others. Others may be anxious about their health or the health of friends and family members. These fears and frustrations can lead to angry outbursts, prolonged sadness, and even depression. Dealing with these heightened emotions can be an additional source of stress for caregivers.

Signs of caregiver stress

It's common for caregivers to focus so much on the person they are caring for that they neglect their own needs to the point it affects your health and ability to function at your best. You are likely to be experiencing caregiver stress if you:

- Feel overwhelmed
- Worry constantly
- Have trouble sleeping or find yourself sleeping too much
- Have gained or lost weight without intending to
- Are easily irritated or provoked to anger
- Have lost interest in activities you used to enjoy
- Often feel sad
- Have frequent headaches, muscle or back pain, or stomach problems
- Are drinking too much or abusing drugs or prescription medications

Each of these is a sign of excess stress. Some are signs of anxiety and depression, which are treatable conditions. For the sake of your health and wellbeing, and for the benefit of the person you care for, pay attention to these signs as possible causes for concern.

How to care for yourself as a caregiver

Take care of your health.

- Eat a healthy diet and keep to regular mealtimes.
- Be sure to drink plenty of water.
- Get some physical activity every day. If you can get outside, fresh air and sunshine are good for your health and mood.
- Adopt healthy sleep habits and stay on a regular sleep schedule.
- Avoid excessive alcohol or substance use.
- Follow the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) [guidelines](#) to protect yourself and others from COVID-19.

Manage your stress.

- Make time to unwind. Take “mini-breaks” throughout the day and longer breaks when you can. Going for a short walk outside, reading a chapter of a book, doing a puzzle, or watching a funny video can relax you, lift your mood, and recharge your energy.
- Connect with people you enjoy and trust. Even if you can’t be together in person, talking with someone who listens to and understands you is powerful medicine.
- Practice stress-reduction techniques. Try activities, such as deep breathing, meditation, or listening to calming music.
- Limit worrisome “what if” thinking. If you find yourself settling into a “worry groove,” refocus your thoughts on something positive or take a step that’s within your control to reduce the risk that concerns you.
- Go easy on yourself. Caregiving can be a challenge in the best of times, and it can be especially difficult during this pandemic. Don’t fault yourself for forgetting things or for feeling frustrated or angry at times.

Seek extra support.

- Know that you aren’t alone. Search online for “caregiver support group” and the name of your community. Spending time with other caregivers, even if it’s limited to online chats or posts, can make you feel less isolated. You may also learn about support services in your community you hadn’t considered.
- Reach out to family and friends. A good conversation when you’re feeling overwhelmed can improve your mood. It can pull you back from the tangle of issues to consider practical steps you might take to address the most important problems first. And there may be ways that family and friends can help you with some of the tasks you’re facing.
- Contact your employee assistance program. The program has experts on elder care and stress management who can help you navigate the challenges you are facing. They can direct you to additional resources you may need, from services in your community to support groups or professional counseling.
- Talk with a professional. If stress, anxiety, or negative thinking are making it difficult to get through the day, your company’s employee assistance program (EAP) can help you find someone to talk with.

Disclaimer: This document is intended for general information only. It does not provide the reader with specific direction, advice, or recommendations. You may wish to contact an appropriate professional for questions concerning your particular situation.

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