

# Caregiver Wellness

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Caregiving for someone with dementia is very demanding. It typically involves devoting a tremendous amount of time and energy. All too frequently in care-giving we "give ourselves away" to the point where personal needs and health are ignored and exhaustion results. The first step to caring for yourself is being aware of your stress level. The definition of stress varies from one person to the next. However, there are several common signs:

**DENIAL** about the disease and its effect on the person who's been diagnosed. (*I know Mom's going to get better.*)

**ANGER** at the person with Alzheimer's or others, that no effective treatments or cures currently exist; and that people don't understand what's going on. (*If he asks me that question one more time I'll scream!*)

**SOCIAL WITHDRAWAL** from friends and activities that once brought pleasure. (*I don't care about getting together with the neighbors anymore.*)

**ANXIETY** about facing another day and what the future holds. (*What happens when he needs more care than I can provide?*)

**DEPRESSION** begins to break your spirit and affects your ability to cope. (*I don't care anymore.*)

**EXHAUSTION** makes it nearly impossible to complete necessary daily tasks. (*I'm too tired for this.*)

**SLEEPLESSNESS** caused by a never-ending list of concerns. (*What if she wanders out of the house or falls and hurts herself.*)

**IRRITABILITY** leads to moodiness and triggers negative responses and reactions. (*Leave me alone.*)

**LACK OF CONCENTRATION** makes it difficult to perform familiar tasks. (*I was so busy, I forgot we had an appointment.*)

**HEALTH PROBLEMS** begin to take their toll, both mentally and physically. (*I can't remember the last time I felt good.*)

Do these signs of stress look familiar? If they do, you may be putting yourself and the person you are caring for at risk. By learning to take care of yourself, you can become a better caregiver for the person with dementia, as well as yourself.

The first step is to take care of yourself. Get enough sleep, eat a balanced diet, avoid harmful habits, and get regular check-ups by your doctor. In addition, make exercise a part of your daily routine. It promotes better sleep, reduces tension and depression, lifts spirits, and increases energy. It is also important to take a few minutes every day to do something for yourself such as have a cup of tea, listen to music, or call a friend. Taking time out isn't selfish; you deserve it. And finally, acknowledge yourself. Remind yourself that you are doing the best that you can at this time. If you think you haven't done anything lately, keep a journal of what you do on a daily basis. You probably will be surprised at what you accomplish!

The second step is to set realistic goals and expectations. One way to avoid disappointment is to plan achievable goals. Ask yourself what can truly be accomplished taking into consideration your health, work, relationships and other demands and limitations. Other tips include: learn to take one day at a time (it lessens the feeling of being overwhelmed); structure your day to get the most out of your time and energy; and make your goal specific. Instead of setting a vague goal of "making Dad feel better," be more specific by "providing Dad with an enjoyable activity at least once a week." Learning to set specific goals will make caregiving more manageable and help you feel more satisfied. Do you have realistic expectations? Or do you sometimes feel that things would be better if only you could do more-- your mother would be happier, your father less confused, your spouse less depressed? Again, acknowledge your efforts and try to balance self-expectations with actual achievements. We are often too hard on ourselves. Forgive yourself for not living up to your ideals, and eliminate the "I should's" from your speech.