



## Taking Care of Yourself

To be able to care for the people you love, you must first take care of yourself. It's like the advice we're given on airplanes: put on your own oxygen mask before trying to help someone else with theirs. Taking care of yourself is a valid goal on its own, and it helps you support the people you love.

Caregivers who pay attention to their own physical and emotional health are better able to handle the challenges of supporting someone with mental illness. They adapt to changes, build strong relationships and recover from setbacks. The ups and downs in your family member's illness can have a huge impact on you. Improving your relationship with yourself by maintaining your physical and mental health makes you more resilient, helping you weather hard times and enjoy good ones. Here are some suggestions for personalizing your self-care strategy.

### Understand How Stress Affects You

Stress affects your entire body, physically as well as mentally. Some common physical signs of stress include:

- Headaches
- Low energy
- Upset stomach, including diarrhea, constipation and nausea
- Aches, pains, and tense muscles
- Insomnia

Begin by identifying how stress feels to you. Then identify what events or situations cause you to feel that way. You may feel stressed by grocery shopping with your spouse when they're symptomatic, or going to school events with other parents who don't know your child's medical history. Once you know which situations cause you stress, you'll be prepared to avoid it and to cope with it when it happens.

### Protect Your Physical Health

Improving your physical wellbeing is one of the most comprehensive ways you can support your mental health. You'll have an easier time maintaining good mental habits when your body is a strong, resilient foundation.

- **Exercise daily.** Exercise can take many forms, such as taking the stairs whenever possible, walking up escalators, and running and biking rather than driving. Joining a class may help you commit to a schedule, if that works best for you. Daily exercise naturally produces stress-relieving hormones in your body and improves your overall health.
- **Eat well.** Eating mainly unprocessed foods like whole grains, vegetables and fresh fruit is key to a healthy body. Eating this way can help lower your risk for chronic diseases, and help stabilize your energy levels and mood.
- **Get enough sleep.** Adults generally need between seven and nine hours of sleep. A brief nap—up to 30 minutes—can help you feel alert again during the day. Even 15 minutes of daytime sleep is helpful. To make your nighttime sleep count more, practice good "sleep hygiene," like avoiding using computers, TV and smartphones before bed.
- **Avoid alcohol and drugs.** They don't actually reduce stress and often worsen it.
- **Practice relaxation exercises.** Deep breathing, meditation and progressive muscle relaxation are easy, quick ways to reduce stress. When conflicts come up between you and your family member, these tools can help you feel less controlled by turbulent feelings and give you the space you need to think clearly about what to do next.

### Recharge Yourself

When you're a caregiver of someone with a condition like mental illness, it can be incredibly hard to find time for yourself, and even when you do, you may feel distracted by thinking about what you "should" be doing instead. But learning to make time for yourself without feeling you're neglecting others—the person with the illness as well as the rest of your family—is critical.

Any amount of time you take for yourself is important. Being out of "caregiver mode" for as little as five minutes in the middle of a day packed with obligations can be a meaningful reminder of who you are in a larger sense. It can help keep you from becoming consumed by your responsibilities. Start small: think about activities you enjoyed before becoming a caregiver and try to work them back into your life. If you used to enjoy days out with friends, try to schedule a standing monthly lunch with them. It becomes part of your routine and no one has to work extra to make it happen each month.

The point is not what you do or how often you do it, but that you do take the time to care for yourself. It's impossible to take good care of anyone else if you're not taking care of yourself first.

## Practice Good Mental Habits

### Avoid Guilt

Try not to feel bad about experiencing negative emotions. You may resent having to remind your spouse to take his medication, then feel guilty. It's natural to think things like "a better person wouldn't be annoyed with their spouse," but that kind of guilt is both untrue and unproductive. When you allow yourself to notice your feelings without judging them as good or bad, you dial down the stress and feel more in control. When you feel less stressed, you're better able to thoughtfully choose how to act.

### Notice The Positive

When you take the time to notice positive moments in your day, your experience of that day becomes better. Try writing down one thing each day or week that was good. Even if the positive thing is tiny ("It was a sunny day"), it's real, it counts and it can start to change your experience of life.

### Gather Strength From Others

NAMI support groups exist to reassure you that countless other people have faced similar challenges and understand your concerns. Talking about your experiences can help. The idea that you can, or should be able to, "solve" things by yourself is false. Often the people who seem like they know how to do everything are actually frequently asking for help; being willing to accept help is a great life skill. If you're having trouble keeping track of your sister's Medicaid documents and you've noticed your coworker is well-organized, ask them for tips about managing paperwork.

You may feel you don't have the time to stay in touch with friends or start new friendships. Focus on the long-term. If you can meet up with a friend once a month, or go to a community event at your local library once every two months, it still helps keep you connected. It also gives you the chance to connect with people on multiple levels. Being a caregiver is an important part of your life, but it's not the whole story.

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