

The Bereavement Caregiver's Self-Care Guidelines

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The following self-care guidelines are not intended to be cure-alls, nor will they be appropriate for everyone. Pick and choose those tips that you believe will be of help to you in your efforts to stay physically and emotionally healthy.

Remember, our attitudes about stress and fatigue in general sometimes make it difficult to make changes. However, one important point to remember is that with support and encouragement from others, most of us can learn to make positive changes in our attitudes and behaviors.

You might find it helpful to have a discussion among coworkers about caregiver fatigue syndrome. Identify your own signs and symptoms of burnout. Discuss individual and group approaches to self-care that will help you enjoy both work and play.

The Joy of Mini-Vacations

What creative ideas can you come up with to renew yourself? Caregivers are notorious for helping others create self-care time while neglecting their own needs. Here are a few ideas to get you started. However, I encourage you to create your own list and pursue them.

- Schedule a massage with a professional massage therapist
- Have a spiritual growth weekend. Retreat into nature. Plan some alone time.
- Go for a drive with no particular destination in mind. Explore the countryside, slow down and observe what you see.
- Treat yourself to a night in a hotel or bed and breakfast.
- Visit a museum or a zoo.
- Go for a hot air balloon ride.
- Take an afternoon off and go to the movies-maybe even a kid's movie!
- Go to a yard sale or auction.
- Go rollerskating or rollerblading with a friend!
- Enjoy a photographic retreat. Take your camera into nature and shoot away.
- Watch cartoons with a child.
- Visit a farmer's market and shop for fresh produce.
- Drop by a health food store and walk the aisles.
- Go dancing.
- Take a horseback ride.
- Plan a river-rafting trip.

Remember Your Child-Like Self

Have you ever met the overly-serious caregiver who projects gloom and doom? Odds are they have forgotten the vitality and enthusiasm of their childhood years. Let's pause and recall some of the characteristics of childhood.

Children:

- are physically connected to the world around them.
- take risks.
- are open, enthusiastic learners
- imagine and dream
- are naturally curious
- spontaneously laugh and smile a lot
- are passionate and expressive
- try new things when they get bored
- rest when they need rest
- try to have fun whenever they can

So, have you "grown up" and forgotten about the joy of being a child? If so, you may have left behind some of the best self-care strategies ever. Think about the way healthy kids go about their day, then think about how you spend your day. Have you forgotten how vital fun is to life and living?

There is a well-established link between play and energy. Playing often can be a vital part of your self-care plan. Being grown-up doesn't mean always being serious. Most really successful people not only work hard, they also play hard. Childlike behavior generates joy, fun and enthusiasm. Ask yourself: What can I do to stay in touch with my inner child?

Work Smart, Not Hard

Many caregivers never had the opportunity to learn essential time-management skills that result in working smart, not hard. You may find the following helpful:

Create specific goals for personal and professional development. Parse your annual goals into monthly goals. Break up your weekly goals into daily goals. Ask yourself, "What do I want to accomplish this year, this month, this week, this day?" Planning each day can give you a road map to getting to your destination!

Do one thing at a time. Caregivers are notorious for trying to do and be all things to all people and all projects all the time. Quality always suffer when you try to do too many things at once.

End the day by planning for tomorrow's projects whenever possible. That way, you'll not only waste less time getting started the following morning, you'll arrive at work feeling more in control of the day ahead.

Protect yourself form constant interruptions. When you're working on a task, nothing will sabotage you more than interruptions. Block out the necessary time to complete tasks.

Work when you work best. We all have certain natural peak hours of performance. Pay attention to your inner clock. Are you a morning person or a night person? Does a brief nap recharge you?

Focus and reject. This is a reminder to stay focused on the task at hand. Learn to "switch off" those things that prevent you from accomplishing desired tasks. Sometimes this means delaying or returning calls and correspondence. If you always "stay available" you won't have time to accomplish what you may really want and need to.

When all else fails, retreat to a hideout. When working on project development, you may need to find a "Skinner Box": a place where you can hole up with no interruptions. Tell only those who truly need to know where you are. You'll be amazed at what you get done.

When you know your energy level is dropping, take a break. After a 10-minute walk or a short nap, you may be able to accomplish much more than you could have otherwise.

Delegate tasks whenever possible. Watch out for "busy work" that might be done more efficiently by someone else.

Throughout the day ask yourself, "What's the best use of my time right now?" Focus on those tasks that need to be done first. This requires discipline, but will pay many dividends.

Build Support Systems

Our work requires a natural outward focus: on the needs of those we attempt to help. Such demands can leave us feeling emotionally and spiritually drained. An important aspect of self-care is to allow us to have sounding boards for this work impacts our lives.

What do support systems provide for us? Ideally, supportive colleagues and friends provide some of the following:

Unconditional acceptance and support. In other words, friendships and the need to be nurtured and understood ourselves.

Help with complicated situations. Assistance in ideas that serve to help us in our efforts to help the dying and the bereaved and their families.

Mentoring. Encouragement to continue to develop new tools to assist us in our work. Models that inspire us and remind us of the importance and value of our work.

Challenge. Encouragement to stretch ourselves beyond our current limits.

Referral. To have connection with additional resources for the people in your care. Good caregivers will recognize occasions when it is appropriate to refer those we work with to other, rich sources of support and counsel.

Ask yourself, can I seek support systems when I need to? Who are the people in my life that make up my support system? List five people you could turn to right now for support and nurturing.

Remember the Importance of "Spiritual Time"

I have found that nurturing my spirit is critical to my work as a bereavement caregiver. "Spiritual time" helps me combat fatigue, frustration and life's disappointments. To be present to those I work with and to learn from those I companion, I must appreciate the beauty of life and living.

Spiritual, quiet moments or "downtime" (for me, often spent in nature) recharges my spiritual energy. While you may embrace your spirit differently than I do, I encourage you to ask yourself: How do I renew my spirit?

Some people do this through prayer and meditation. Others might do this by hiking, biking, running or other forms of physical alone time. Obviously, there is no one right way to renew your spirit. But one reality is that to be present to others in healing ways, we must each find a way to massage our spirits.

I've always found profound meaning in the words of Carl Sandburg, who wrote the following:

"A man must get away now and then to experience loneliness."

"Only those who learn how to live in loneliness can come to know themselves and life."

"I go out there and walk and look at the trees and sky."

"I listen to the sounds of loneliness. I sit on a rock or stump and say to myself "Who are you Sandburg? Where have you been, and where are you going?"

So, I ask you to ask yourself: How do I keep my spirit alive? How do I listen to my heart? How do I appreciate the good, the beautiful and the truthful in life?

Listen to Your Inner Voice

As a caregiver to the dying and the bereaved, you will at times become grief overloaded (too much death, grief and loss in your day-to-day life.) The natural demands of this kind of work can cause you to have tunnel vision about death and grief. For example, if your own child has a headache, you may immediately think brain tumor. If your partner complains of heartburn, you think heart attack.

I'll never forget the time I returned home from a three-day lecture series on childhood grief to find my office manager had scheduled the following day full of counseling a variety of bereaved persons and two dying children and their families. Sitting there looking at the schedule, my inner voice called out, "I cannot do any more sadness right now. I need and deserve a spirit break." So, I rescheduled all appointments for the day and instead went for a drive through nearby Rocky Mountain National Park. I returned home in the late afternoon and spent the remainder of the day playing with my children and being present to my wife.

Caregiving presents you with the gift of an enhanced awareness of the many tragedies that touch people's lives. Just as those you companion are changed by death, you are changed by their experiences as well. To embrace our deep appreciation for life and love we must stay grounded-and to do so means caring for ourselves as well as care for others.

A Self-Care Manifesto for Caregivers to the Dying and the Bereaved

We who care for the bereaved and the dying have a wondrous opportunity: to help others embrace and grow through grief-and to lead fuller, more deeply-lived lives ourselves because of this important work.

But our work is draining-physically, emotionally and spiritually. We must first care for ourselves if we want to care well for others. This manifesto is intended to empower you to practice good self-care.

1. *I deserve to lead a joyful, whole life.*

No matter how much I love and value my work, my life is multi-faceted. My family, my friends, my other interests and my spirituality also deserve my time and attention. I deserve my time and attention.

2. *My work does not define me.* I am a unique, worthy person outside my work life. While relationships can help me feel good about myself, they are not what is inside me. Sometimes I need to stop "doing" and instead focus on simply "being."

3. *I am not the only one who can help dying and bereaved people.* When I feel indispensable, I tend to ignore my own needs. There are many talented caregivers in my community who can also help the dying and the bereaved.

4. *I must develop healthy eating, sleeping and exercise patterns.* I am aware of the importance of these things for those I help, but I may neglect them myself. A well-balanced diet, adequate sleep and regular exercise allow me to be the best I can be.

5. *If I've been overinvolved in my caregiving for too long, I may have forgotten how to take care of myself.* I may need to rediscover ways of caring for and nurturing myself. I may need to relearn how to explore my own feelings instead of focusing on everybody else's.

6. *I must maintain boundaries in my helping relationships.* As a death caregiver, I cannot avoid getting emotionally involved with dying and bereaved people. Nor would I want to. Active empathy allows me to be a good companion to them. However, I must remember I am responsible to others, not for others.

7. *I am not perfect and I must not expect myself to be.* I often wish my helping efforts were always successful. But even when I offer compassionate, "on-target" help, the recipient of that help isn't always prepared to use it. And when I do make mistakes, I should see them as an integral part of learning and growth, not as measurements of my self-worth.

8. *I must practice effective time-management skills.* I must set practical goals for how I spend my time. I must also remember Pareto's principle: twenty percent of what I do nets eighty percent of my results.

9. *I must also practice setting limits and alleviating stresses I can do something about.* I must work to achieve a clear sense of expectations and set realistic deadlines. I should enjoy what I do accomplish in helping others but shouldn't berate myself for what is beyond me.

10. *I must listen to my inner voice.* As a caregiver to the dying and the bereaved, I will at times become grief overloaded. When my inner voice begins to whisper its fatigue, I must listen carefully and allow myself some grief down-time.

11. *I should express the personal me in both my work and play.* I shouldn't be afraid to demonstrate my unique talents and abilities. I must also make time each day to remind myself of what is important to me. If I only had three months to live, what would I do?

12. *I am a spiritual being.* I must spend alone time focusing on self-understanding and self-love. To be present to those I work with and to learn from those I companion, I must appreciate the beauty of life and living. I must renew my spirit.

An 18" x 24" color poster of the Caregiver's Self-Care Manifesto is available from Companion Press for \$10.00. Self-care wallet cards are also available. Call (970) 226-6050 for ordering information or visit www.centerforloss.com.

Related Resources

- [Companioning You! A Soulful Guide to Caring for Yourself While You Care for the Dying and the Bereaved](#) (book)

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