

TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF

Supporting a person with Alzheimer's disease or another form of dementia is a challenging responsibility that can feel overwhelming throughout the different stages of the disease. No matter how you look at it, caregiving is very stressful

Self-care is an area of caregiving that is frequently overlooked. While caregivers are doing their best to take care of the person with dementia, many tend to forget to care for themselves. Although it may be difficult to prioritize your own needs, it is important to think about your own well-being in order to positively impact the quality of life of both yourself and the person for whom you are caring.

Caring for someone with dementia is a long-term commitment. Caregivers sometimes need to be reminded that a sustained response can also lead to physical and emotional wear and tear, or even burnout. When you burn out, you feel depleted of all your energy, your defence mechanisms and your ability to cope. Your mood, attitude, motivation, and behaviour are also negatively affected.

Identifying personal barriers to self-care

Often, attitudes and misconceptions can get in the way of taking care of yourself. For many dementia caregivers, failing to make self-care a priority is part of a life-long pattern of putting the needs of others before their own. However, as caregivers we must try to change these old patterns for our sake, and the sake of the person we are taking care for. It is not easy to do, but it is feasible.

The first step in taking care of yourself is to identify attitudes or misconceptions that stand in your way, and then try to modify them.

Below is a list of attitudes and beliefs frequently held by caregivers which have the potential to inhibit one's ability to practice self-care. Take a look at the items below and circle any that you can relate to.

Do you subscribe to any of the following misconceptions?

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I feel selfish putting my own needs first. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If I don't do it, no one will.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I put my own wellbeing last. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I never 'waste' time relaxing.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If I do it right, I will get the love, attention, and respect I deserve. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I never say "no" to a request; I do not want to disappoint people.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is frightening to think of my own needs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I feel guilty if I take a break or think of myself.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I do not feel that I deserve a break. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I have trouble asking for what I need.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I constantly worry about the person I am caring for, even if I only take a little bit of time off. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Everything I do has to be perfect; I will never accept anything less than perfect.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I feel too tired or I have no time to make an effort to be good to myself. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I believe that it is my responsibility to provide all the care, all the time.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I want to take a break, but the person being cared for does not let me. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I feel inadequate or like a failure if I ask for help.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I do not know what is available, or how to get help organizing a break. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I assume sole responsibility for solving all the problems.

Source: *Family Caregiver Alliance*

Once you have determined the misconceptions that you subscribe to, identify the ways in which they are unreasonable. Consider asking friends and family for help in order to allow you to begin caring for yourself.

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Be aware of the signs of stress

Excessive stress is a real health hazard that can lead to burnout and health problems. If the following symptoms happen on a regular basis, you need to take better care of yourself, and seek the assistance of others.

- **Denial** about the severity of the disease of the person you are taking care of, denial about the toll caregiving takes on you.
- **Anger** at the person with dementia, at yourself, or at others.
- **Social withdrawal.** You no longer want to stay in touch with friends and family, or you have lost interest in participating in activities that you used to enjoy.
- **Anxiety** about facing another day, and what the future holds. You feel trapped in your situation.
- **Depression.** You feel sad or hopeless most of the time. You have low self-esteem. You often feel like crying, you have lost your sense of humour, you have dark thoughts.
- **Emotional reactions.** You cry at minor upsets; you are often irritable, impatient, or frustrated.
- **Lack of concentration.** You have trouble focusing and you find it difficult to complete tasks. "I used to do the daily crossword. Now I am lucky if I can solve half of it."
- **Escape activities.** You have started or have increased your drinking, smoking, overeating, compulsive gambling or compulsive spending.
- **Health problems.** Excessive stress can make you physically ill. Be aware of changes in your physical well-being. You might become sick more often (for example, come down more often with a cold or flu), or even develop chronic health problems.

Source: Alzheimer Society of Canada

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