

A Caregiver's Guide to Avoid Burnout





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Introduction

Providing emotional support and physical care to someone who is ill can be a satisfying and rewarding journey. It can also be challenging, especially if you need to balance a job, family and housework on top of caring for the person who is ill (care recipient). It may even lead to feeling stressed, angry and guilty.

Caregivers may think they can (and should) do everything by themselves. However, this can lead to burnout. It is important for caregivers to get practical and emotional support. Sharing your concerns with others will help relieve stress. It may also give you a different and positive way of looking at the challenges of being a caregiver.



Managing Negative Emotions

A caregiver's role is challenging. You may want perfect results for everything you do but it is not possible. When you are unhappy, you may look for excuses to be angry. Caregivers may also feel impatient, depressed and hostile.

Feelings of Guilt

Even if you are doing everything well, you may think that you are not doing enough. At least once every day, tell yourself:



How much you are helping the person in your care (the care recipient).



Even if you don't do everything well, you are doing everything with love.



You are improving your caregiving skills and showing compassion.



Depression is Dangerous

Depression endangers the caregiver’s health and well-being and can affect the care recipient’s recovery. Depression can increase the risk of developing illnesses in the major diseases category, particularly heart disease.

Symptoms of Depression	
Feeling sad, anxious or “empty”	Feelings of hopelessness
Feelings of guilt, worthlessness, helplessness	Loss of interest or enjoyment in hobbies and other activities, including sex
No energy, always tired, feeling “slowed down”	Can’t concentrate, remember things or make decisions
Oversleep or can’t sleep	Loss of appetite, weight loss or weight gain
Thoughts about death or suicide, or suicidal attempts	Restless, always feeling irritated

If you have five or more of these symptoms for more than two weeks, you may have depression. Make an appointment and talk to a doctor, psychiatrist or psychologist.

If you have stress symptoms, here are some ways to manage them:



To avoid burnout, set aside time for yourself



Make and keep doctors’ appointments to maintain your own health



Join a caregiver support group to expand your network



Make use of respite care opportunities – you must rest so that you can care for your loved one better



Talk to a professional, friend or family member about the challenges you face and explore ways to manage your stress

Anger

You may feel trapped because of your care recipient's illness. It's natural to feel frustrated or angry but showing it openly to your care recipient will not improve the situation.

However, it's not healthy to keep those feelings to yourself. Instead, try these options:

1. Join a support group for caregivers. It can provide opportunities for you to share your feelings openly. Group members will understand how you feel and no one will make you feel guilty. They may even offer practical, effective advice or solutions. Research also shows that support groups can help caregivers deal with their situations better.
2. Make an appointment with a therapist, family counsellor or spiritual advisor. If possible, make one for yourself and a separate one for you and the care recipient.
3. Keep a diary and write down your feelings.
4. Remember that care recipients who feel that they have lost control of their life may try to control whom or what they can.
5. Don't blame your care recipient for the situation you are in. Try to separate the person from the condition. The illness, not the care recipient, is the reason for the difficulties and challenges both of you are facing.



Tips

Sometimes it is necessary to **tell the care recipient how you feel**. However, avoid accusing him or her personally.

Telling him or her "You make me angry" may make the situation worse. Instead, try telling him or her this: "I am trying to understand what you are going through, please try to understand what I am going through too."

Coping with Emotional Burdens

It may seem as though you are the only one facing these problems, but you are not alone.

Every caregiver faces the following at some point:

1. The need to hide his or her grief
2. Fear of the future
3. Worries about money
4. Having less ability to solve problems

Dependency and Isolation

Fear of dependency, loneliness or isolation are common in families of people who are ill. The care recipient can become more and more dependent on the caregiver.

At the same time, the caregiver will need more respite and support. Many caregivers may feel bad asking for help.

However, those caregivers who are able to develop personal and social support will cope better.



Knowing When to Seek Help

It is easy to feel invisible. Everyone's attention may be on the person with the illness. They may not understand the caregiver. Many caregivers say that nobody asks how they are. Mental health experts' advice is not to let such feelings build up. Caregivers must tell other people how they feel and what they need.

Support groups, religious and spiritual advisors, or mental health counsellors can advise caregivers on new and positive ways to ask for help.

“
Why doesn't
anyone ask
how I am
doing?
”

Seek professional help if you:

1. Drink more alcohol than usual
2. Often take prescriptive medication without a doctor's advice
3. Suffer from skin rashes, backaches, colds or a flu that won't go away
4. Can't focus or think clearly
5. Feel tired and don't want to do anything
6. Feel sad all the time
7. Have fear and anxiety
8. Feel worthless and guilty
9. Feel depressed for two weeks or more
10. Have thoughts of committing suicide
11. Have physically hurt or is thinking about hurting the care recipient

Managing Anger

Anger is a common emotion for both caregivers and care recipients. The situation feels unfair. Both sides may say hurtful words during a difficult situation. One person may slam a door during a disagreement or both sides may start shouting instead of talking.

If you feel angry and frustrated, don't ignore these emotions.

Find healthy and positive ways to let off steam. Try some of these methods to let go of anger and frustration in a safe way:

1. Exercise (e.g. take a walk to cool down)
2. Write your thoughts in your diary
3. Go to a private corner or room and take out your anger on a big pillow



Checklist: Dealing with Physical and Emotional Burdens

<input type="checkbox"/> Don't give in when your care recipient is too demanding	<input type="checkbox"/> Live one day at a time
<input type="checkbox"/> Make a list of important tasks, think of ways to make your work easier, allow some things to be left undone	<input type="checkbox"/> When handling a difficult task, make it easier by listening to music
<input type="checkbox"/> Find time for regular exercise, keep fit and increase your energy	<input type="checkbox"/> Focus on getting relaxing sleep instead of more sleep
<input type="checkbox"/> Take short rests in the day to get enough sleep	<input type="checkbox"/> Set aside time for meditation, reflection or prayer
<input type="checkbox"/> Do deep breathing exercises and meditate to free your mind of troubles	<input type="checkbox"/> Take care of your self-esteem; remember that you have skills and talents

<input type="radio"/> Realise that you have limitations and accept them	<input type="radio"/> Set goals; remember that you may not be able to do everything like before
<input type="radio"/> Have a balanced diet	<input type="radio"/> Make time for yourself
<input type="radio"/> Treat yourself to a massage	<input type="radio"/> Keep in contact with friends and take part in interesting activities
<input type="radio"/> Let friends or family know that you welcome help; allow them to help with respite care	<input type="radio"/> When you visit the doctor, talk about your caregiving responsibilities, not just your symptoms
<input type="radio"/> Share your concerns with a friend	<input type="radio"/> Join a support group, or start one to share ideas and resources
<input type="radio"/> Use respite care services in the community	<input type="radio"/> Speak openly and honestly to people who should be doing more to help
<input type="radio"/> Make a list of tasks and assign specific ones to people who offer to help	<input type="radio"/> Don't feel guilty about your emotions. They are natural and very human
<input type="radio"/> Express your anger and frustration by writing down your feelings	<input type="radio"/> Allow yourself to cry
<input type="radio"/> Remind yourself that you are doing something important for the person in your care	

Self-Care for Caregivers

If you don't take care of yourself, the care recipient may suffer too. Part of your responsibility towards the person in your care is to take care of yourself.

Tips

Here's a thought to keep in mind:

In the safety talk before a flight, the flight stewardess always tell the adults to put on the oxygen mask first before they help the children. This is because if the adults faint, the children's safety and lives will be at risk too.



Exercise

Even moderate exercise helps. A sedentary (lack of physical activity) lifestyle is a risk factor for all major diseases.

Walking is an easy way to exercise. If you cannot walk for 30 – 40 minutes at a stretch, try several 5 – 10 minute periods. Exercise improves your mood as well as your appearance. It also gives you opportunities to meet new friends. Find a way to make exercise part of your day.

Tips

Sport Singapore runs many ActiveSG Gymnasiums islandwide that you can use at a low cost. You can also join a brisk walking club at your nearest Community Club.

Eat Right

Nutrition is important. Learn to read food labels and avoid foods with high fat content. Monitor portion sizes; for example, one serving of meat is about a palm-sized amount.

Tips

1. Calorie-dense foods, e.g. chocolate, pack a lot of calories in a small package. For example, 230 grams of broccoli is about 65 calories, while 230 grams of chocolate chip cookies is about 1,070 calories.

Fresh fruit and vegetables usually have fewer calories than processed foods. Canned fruit often contain added sugar, while canned vegetables generally have added salt.

2. The Health Promotion Board recommends two servings of fruit and two servings of vegetables daily. To ensure you achieve that goal, keep apples, oranges, papayas, pears and bananas in the kitchen and snack on fruit throughout the day.



Take Care of the Caregiver

Many caregivers neglect their own health.

Do not ignore signs of health problems. Stay healthy by exercising, eating a proper diet and going for regular medical check-ups.

Many caregivers do not get enough sleep. If your sleep is disrupted because the care recipient needs help during the night, draw up a schedule so that you can take turns with other family members to stay awake.



Meditation

Your journey as a caregiver can be less stressful if you practise meditation. Think of meditation as sitting still and doing nothing.

Here are seven easy steps:

1. Sit up straight on a chair or a big, firm pillow.
2. As you inhale, tense up your entire body – arms, legs, buttocks, fists. Scrunch up the muscles in your face too.
3. Hold for two-three seconds.
4. Exhale and relax (repeat twice).
5. Take a deep breath; let your belly expand.
6. Exhale and relax (repeat twice).
7. Breathe normally and be aware of your thoughts for five minutes.



1. Most people think meditation is about clearing your mind of thoughts. Instead of emptying your mind, “observe” your thoughts. There are no “right” or “wrong” thoughts. Don’t focus on any of your thoughts but don’t force yourself to stop thinking.

An easy way to do that is to label each thought as it bubbles up e.g. sad thought, happy thought, angry thought, depressed thought, to-do list thought. Then, let the thought go and label the next one that appears.

2. Use a kitchen timer to help you keep track of the five minutes.

It is not important how much time you spend meditating. You can start by spending five minutes on it. Meditation can be effective in reducing stress if you practise it every day.

Meditate before your care recipient wakes up or after he or she goes to bed or is taking a nap. You may spend only five or ten minutes on it, but you will notice its benefits after a few weeks.

Planning for Long-Term Care

Caregivers think they can and must do everything themselves. You may be able to manage for a few weeks or even months, but the average caregiver may spend years in that role.

Treat caregiving as though you are running a marathon.

Pace yourself from the start, so that you do not run too fast and burn out before the race is over.

Find effective ways to share your load or get help from others:

1. Talk to a counsellor or therapist
2. Talk to a neutral third party, even if it's by phone or e-mail
3. Join a local or online support group
4. Keep a diary

Tips

If you find yourself feeling angry about your caregiving responsibilities, don't keep it inside. Instead, talk about it.



Respite Time

Respite time gives you a break from your caregiving responsibilities. It can help you to relieve stress. Therefore, having respite time from your role as a caregiver is not a luxury, it is a necessity.

Every caregiver needs respite time. It may be hard to think of your own needs when caring for a loved one. However, if you don't, your life will be taken over by your duties and you will burn out.

Your care recipient's level of care needs determines whether he or she can be left alone and for how long. Here are some care options:

1. Ask a family member or friend to stay with your care recipient for an hour or more.
2. Take your care recipient to a day care centre.
3. Get home care services to help your care recipient for a few hours per week or per month.
4. Hire a foreign domestic worker.
5. Help your care recipient join a support group.

After you arrange for help, you must make an effort to take time off (e.g. once a week) to do something for yourself.



To make this happen, you must insist on making use of this time to take care of your own needs.

Remember, caregiving is a marathon, not a sprint. You should see respite time as a means to help you finish the race.

Respite Zone

A respite zone is an area set aside just for the caregiver. This space could be your bedroom, a spare room or an office. It should be a place for you to take a break while the care recipient rests or is taken care of by someone else.

Here are some things to note while creating your respite zone:



Keep in mind what you want to do there
e.g. read, paint, write.



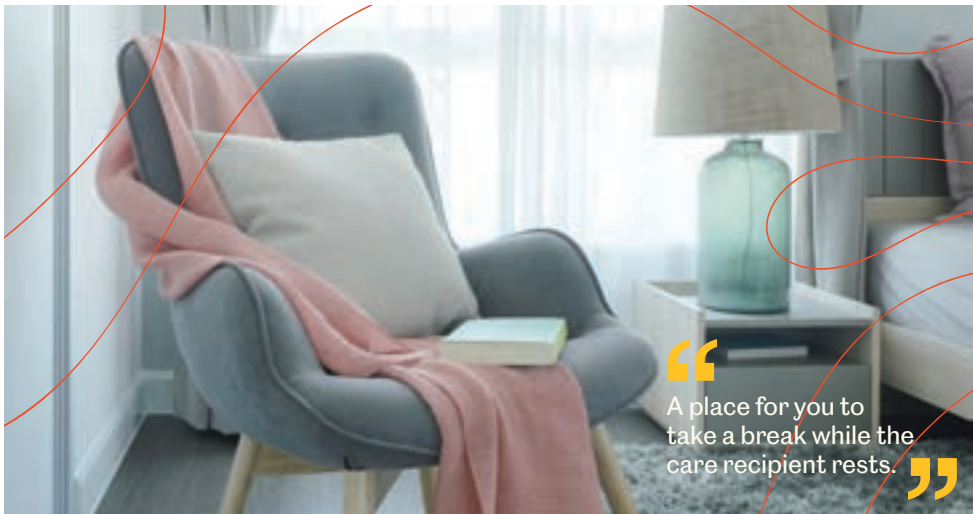
Identify the time you will use it
e.g. during your care recipient's nap time, or when someone takes over your caregiving duties.



Identify a suitable space in your home
e.g. the balcony, a spare room, or a corner of your bedroom. Use a screen or a curtain for privacy if you can't close the door.



Modify the space according to your needs
e.g. place a reading chair with a lamp or a headset for music. Keep whatever is necessary for your respite activity.



Your respite zone should be a place you created. The objective is to have a place of your own in your home where you can relax. Some may enjoy surfing the Internet while others may enjoy listening to music.

You can use your respite zone for creative projects like painting, sewing, writing, baking, gardening and photography. These activities can take your mind off your responsibilities.

Your respite zone should be just for you. You need to feel secure that your things are safe and will not be used or thrown away. It is important for the people you live with to understand that this space is yours.

Taking care of a family member or friend who is sick and may not recover completely can be a difficult job. However, if you do not take time off and create space for yourself, what will happen if you fall sick?

Respite care is necessary for you and your care recipient's well-being.

“

It is not selfish to set aside space and time for yourself.

Without the space, time and the opportunity to be with your own thoughts, your caregiving journey may be harder than it has to be.

”

Changes in Attitude Can Relieve Stress

Here are some suggestions to help reduce your stress level:

1. Learn to say no. Setting limits can improve relationships.
2. Control your attitude. Don't think about what you don't have or can't change.
3. Appreciate what you have and can do.
4. Find simple ways to have fun. Play a board game, organise family photos, listen to music, read about an inspiring person.
5. Learn ways to better manage your time e.g. make a to-do list (include things that you enjoy).
6. Knowledge is empowering; get information about your care recipient's condition.
7. Limit coffee and caffeine intake.
8. Make sure you have a support system.
9. Share your feelings with someone.
10. Keep a journal – write down three new things you are grateful for every day.
11. Memorise an inspiring poem.



You can improve your situation by acknowledging your role. Caregivers who are the spouse of their care recipients may not see their caregiving role as separate from their role as a spouse.

No matter how much the caregiver loves the care recipient, long-term caregiving can be too much for one person. Ask for and accept help from as many sources as possible.

Outside Activities

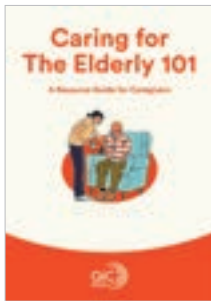
Successful caregivers don't give up their activities. Many organisations have respite care services to give caregivers a break. Other family members are often happy and willing to spend time with the care recipient.

Try to get respite care on a regular basis and keep a list of the people you can go to for help.

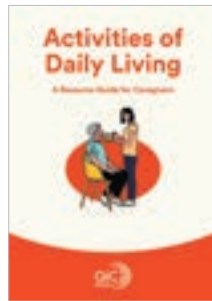
If your friends want to know how they can ease your burden, ask them to:	
Call and be a good listener as you may voice strong feelings	Offer words of appreciation for your efforts
Share a meal	Help you find useful information about community resources
Show genuine interest	Stop by to visit, or send cards, letters, pictures, or humorous newspaper clippings
Share the workload	

Additional Resources

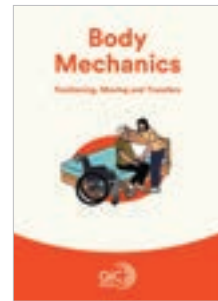
Whether you are just starting your journey as a caregiver or someone who has been caring for a loved one for years, you need to arm yourself with up-to-date information, advice and support.



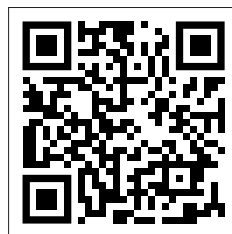
A handy guide covering the basics of caregiving, especially for those new to this.



Useful tips and information on how to assist your loved one in aspects of daily living.



Tips on safely moving your loved ones without causing any injury to yourself.



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Notes:

Contact Us

AIC Link

Island-wide resource centres where our Care Consultants advise caregivers and their loved ones on getting the right care at the right place, enabling our seniors to age-in-place.

AIC Link @ Maxwell

7 Maxwell Road #04-01
MND Complex Annexe B
Singapore 069111
(Above Amoy Street Food Centre)

Operating Hours:

Mondays to Fridays: 8.30am to 5.30pm
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For other AIC Link locations, visit

www.aic.sg/about-us/aic-link

AIC Hotline

1800 650 6060

A one-stop toll-free helpline providing convenient access to information on eldercare and caregiving support services.

Operating Hours:

Mondays to Fridays: 8.30am to 8.30pm
Saturdays: 8.30am to 4.00pm
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The Agency for Integrated Care (AIC) aims to create a vibrant care community for people to live well and age gracefully. AIC coordinates and supports efforts in integrating care to achieve the best care outcomes for our clients.

We reach out to caregivers and seniors with information on staying active and ageing well, and connect people to services they need.

We support stakeholders in their efforts to raise the quality of care, and also work with health and social care partners to provide services for the ageing population.

Our work in the community brings care services and information closer to those in need.