

**Avoiding Caregiver Burnout** by Jenna Firehammer

*<https://www.serenityhc.org/blog/hospice-and-palliative-care/2017/avoiding-caregiver-burnout>*

I have often said that we are never more fulfilled than when we find ourselves devoted to the selfless care of others. Being a caregiver is a privilege; we are entrusted with the very life and well-being of another living soul. However, being a caregiver is also weary work. It can leave us desperately depleted if we do not take the measures necessary to ensure that the well of our own resources does not run dry, as we pour out our love and compassion on others.

## **1. Care for Yourself**

We've heard it dozens of times while flying, or watching movies about flying; "Secure your oxygen mask first, and then assist those traveling with you." Perhaps that seems selfish, as though we care more for our own safety and wellbeing than that of our children or other loved ones, but that is certainly not the case. Instead, this direction is given to ensure that we will be able to care for those in our charge. By preserving our own lives, we safeguard our ability to care for those around us. It is no different in a season of life when we called upon to care for a loved one who is in need. There is a tendency for devoted caregivers to put our loved one first, at all times, while we give no thought to our own health, our emotional needs or our need for rest. It makes us feel self-sacrificing and heroic, but in reality it is not wise. If we don't take proper care of ourselves, we are not ensuring that we will be able to continue providing excellent care in the long run. We are not preserving our health, nor our patience, and above all, we are not preventing burnout. In order to give our best to our dear ones, we must get proper rest, be mindful of our diet and exercise, and even set aside a little time and money for pampering ourselves once in a while.

## **2. Seek the Support of Family and Friends**

A good caregiver always needs a strong support system. We need someone to encourage us in our efforts when we are weary, someone to listen while we vent about the demands of caregiving, and ultimately, we need someone who can step up and give us a much-needed break from our duties from time to time. This is easier said than done when we are the primary caregiver. We don't want to feel that we are complaining, or that we resent our loved one, nor do we want to feel as though we are trying to push the burden of their care off on anyone else. Sometimes these concerns make us unwilling to reach out for the support we need. Other times, we may be willing to ask for help, but we find it hard to get anyone to listen, or to trust someone else enough to provide the same standard of care that we give our loved one, while we have a respite. A good rule of thumb is to reach out to family first, in hopes that they will feel a responsibility to be there for us and our loved one. Next, reach out to friends. Friends are not obligated to us like family; they are in our lives because they choose to be, and sometimes a friend will step up even when family will not. Lastly, if we still find ourselves lacking support, we must reach out to our community. Churches and non-profit groups often have volunteers, support groups and even free resources available. The support we need is out there, we just have to be committed to finding it.

### **3. Seek Spiritual Renewal**

As humans we are made up of body, mind and spirit. Just as critical as having nourishment, hydration and rest to sustain our physical body, we must also care for our mind and our spirit. Caregiving is a continuous drain on us emotionally, just as it is physically, and if we do not seek the renewal of our hearts and minds, we will soon find ourselves operating at a deficit and experiencing things like resentment, depression, outbursts of anger and even mental and emotional breakdown. It is like driving a car that is running low on oil. We may be able to put quite a few miles on the vehicle before things get critical, but when the last drop of oil is spent, our engine will overheat and begin to self-destruct. As caregivers, when our emotional stores are depleted, we can only run on empty for so long before we start sustaining mental, emotional and spiritual damage. We humans were designed to have our hearts and minds renewed continually by deep spiritual connections and those connections are vital to longevity as a caregiver. Many find these connections in prayer, meditation, studying the Bible or other books of philosophy and poetry. Some find release in music or hobbies like gardening, woodworking or cooking. Others find spiritual renewal by connecting with nature; being outdoors, exercising or spending time with animals. Those of us who are fortunate enough to have a loving and supportive spouse, or other close friend or family member, can find deep renewal connecting with that individual, and in turn, being filled up emotionally. Whatever makes us feel fresh and new and strong; that is what we must seek out! That is what we must make time for in our busy lives in order to be at our best.

### **4. Consider Facility Placement or an In-Home Caregiver**

Many caregivers are afraid to admit that they can't do it on their own anymore, but the bravest and wisest among us will be ready to make the decision when the time comes. When it aligns with the wishes of our loved one, and the proper resources are available to pay for a top-rated nursing home, facility placement can be a life-changing opportunity for everyone involved. Imagine our loved one receiving around-the-clock care by a professional staff that is tending to their every need. Imagine us getting to visit as frequently as we want, when we are fresh and rested and full of joy to share with our loved one, instead of worn down, burned out and completely drained as we attempt to care for them alone. If facility placement is not an option, perhaps savings or insurance would pay for home health, a bath aide or a chore worker. Sometimes just a few visits a week from a hired care-giver, companion or home-health nurse can bring a tremendous amount of relief to the demands we face with a loved one's care. We must seek the resources available to us; not only for our sake, but for the quality of life of the dear one we have devoted ourselves to caring for.

## **5. Choose Hospice Early**

We never want to think of the day that our loved one receives a terminal diagnosis, but if and when that day comes, we must understand what hospice is and how it can make the most of the final season of life. Many people think that hospice is merely a team coming in to assist in the dying process in the final days of life, but this is not the case. Hospice care is about keeping our dear ones comfortable so that they can enjoy the days, weeks and months that they have left. Hospice allows us to have the conversations necessary to help our loved ones face death without fear, carry out their wishes regarding death, and above all, making as many of their dreams come true as possible before they pass on from this life. Hospice is not about dying. It is about bringing comfort, uniting families and granting the desires of a loved one's heart. The earlier a patient is placed on hospice, the more time our team of doctors, nurses, social workers, chaplains and volunteers have to make those things happen for the ones we love. To learn more about the Hospice Philosophy and the services offered by Serenity HospiceCare, please visit us online at [www.serenityhc.org](http://www.serenityhc.org).

Caregivers are amazing people, full of compassion, and devoted to making sure our loved ones receive everything they need, no matter the cost, but caregiving is demanding work. We, as caregivers, must avoid burnout at all costs. We must care for ourselves, reach out for the support we need, and ensure that we are at our best for our dear ones. May God bless and strengthen each of us as we give of ourselves for the good of others and make the difficult decisions we all must face in the end.