

Burnout can happen to anyone!

Caregiving is difficult and exhausting work. If you don't create balance in your life by setting limits on what you can do and when, you may begin suffering from a condition called "burnout." When it comes to caregiving for an ill or disabled person, some people cope better than others. But everyone's flame is at risk of flickering out, if they aren't careful.

Ayala Pines and Elliot Aronson, researchers who have made it their life's work to study burnout, defined it as "... a state of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion caused by long-term involvement in emotionally demanding situations." Since then, Pines has elegantly simplified the definition. "Burnout," she wrote, "is a state where highly committed individuals lose their spirit." We're not talking about just a little stress here — burnout occurs when caregiving no longer feels meaningful because the caregiver is on emotional overload and physically exhausted!

Symptoms of stress

Symptoms of chronic stress associated with burnout often show up in a number of ways.

Physical symptoms can include:

- Fatigue
- Headaches
- Sleep problems
- Ulcers
- High blood pressure
- Increased pain (especially in the neck and back)
- A worsening of already existing medical problems

Victims of burnout often feel:

- Depressed
- Isolated
- Disappointed with themselves
- Hopeless
- Helpless
- Angry
- Frustrated
- Trapped

Physical symptoms and raw emotions naturally pop up at various times throughout a caregiver's journey — this is normal. But it is a problem when we ignore our body's signals telling us to slow down — or when crushing, negative emotions persist relentlessly day after day. People who are burned out often project a negative attitude and express cynicism about everything. If these feelings persist, they can easily develop into a serious problem.



Enthusiasts take note

Interestingly, the people most prone to burnout are those who begin their caregiving role very idealistically. They have great intentions for what they will accomplish and want to give it their all. They feel they can make a difference. However, when things don't go smoothly or as planned, the caregiver takes responsibility, becomes overwhelmed and feels like a complete failure. When this happens, caregiving no longer seems meaningful; it has morphed into an unstoppable headache!

Take the Burnout Quiz

If you feel overwhelmed and unable to take another step forward you may be experiencing burnout. Take the burnout quiz to find out if your flame is about to fizzle.

Are you burned out from caregiving?	TRUE Most of the time	FALSE Not the case in my situation
1. I feel emotionally drained because of my caregiving duties.		
2. I've developed a negative attitude.		
3. I feel stressed out more often than not.		
4. I have more medical problems as a result of being a caregiver.		
5. I feel more depressed and/or anxious than before I became a caregiver.		
6. I'm not successful as a caregiver.		
7. I have trouble sleeping at night.		
8. I feel all alone – no one helps me.		
9. I have trouble making time for myself and taking a break.		
10. I feel trapped in my caregiver role.		
11. I feel hopeless, as if there is no help for my situation.		
12. I am angry & frustrated a lot of the time.		
13. Sometimes I take my anger & frustration out on the person I'm caring for.		

Where Do You Stand?

The more items you answered "TRUE" to on the Burnout Quiz, the higher the likelihood you are experiencing burnout! Even if you responded "TRUE" to just one question, you will benefit from additional help in your caretaking responsibilities.



Red alert

If you answered “TRUE” to question 13, your situation is critical! Feeling angry and frustrated during the course of caregiving is normal. All caregivers do from time to time. This is a big job full of unexpected potholes. However, taking out your frustrations on the person who is ill or disabled indicates a danger signal and requires immediate action!

Warning signs:

- Yelling — If you yell at the person you care for, it's time to take a break.
- Abuse — If you have neglected, hit, shoved, shaken, punished, threatened or tied down/restrained the person you care for, you have lost control of yourself and the situation. Even if you think you will never do it again — you should seek immediate respite from your caregiving duties and get help from a professional.

The Challenge: Avoiding burnout

Frank Ostaseski of the Alaya Institute is well known in the hospice and palliative care field. His words for caregivers are inspirational:

“... find a place to rest in the middle of things ... We often think of rest as something that will come when everything else is complete, like when we go on a holiday or when our work is done. We imagine that we can only find rest by changing the conditions of our life. But it is possible to discover rest right in the middle of chaos. It is experienced when we bring our full attention, without distraction to this moment, to this activity. This place of rest is always available. We need only turn toward it.”

Making time to take care of yourself is often easier said than done. According to a National Alliance for Caregiving & AARP 2004 study, 51 percent of caregivers report they have less time for families and friends because of their role. And 44 percent of caregivers give up vacations, hobbies and social activities. In fact, a common caregiver refrain is, “I just don't have time to take a break!” However, failing to take time off is a perilous form of self-neglect! Ignoring your need to rest can lead to burnout, compromised health and result in poor caregiving.

Finding personal space

Rest

Caregivers need to rest on a regular basis, engage life and participate in regular health maintenance. Women in particular tend to “do” for others, sacrificing their own well-being. To create a healthier caregiving experience, women must overcome society's description of them as perpetual caretakers and ask other family members and friends to step in and give them room to care for themselves.

Let go for a little while

A study conducted by the Family Care Alliance (FCA) found that 35 percent of caregivers say they need help finding more time for themselves. Let's face it: anyone with responsibilities in their lives needs time off to recharge their batteries. Here are some ideas to help jumpstart some positive changes:

- Ask for and accept offers of help, small and large.
- Learn about available services in your community.
- Explore respite options — who can take over your caretaking duties for a while?



Figure out what you need and ask for it

Set realistic caregiving and life goals for yourself and know your limits. Then ask for help with the rest. You may struggle with asking friends and relatives for help, but how else will they know that you need a break, when and for how long? They can't read your mind. Asking is a sign that you are aware of your limits and realize that being at your peak performance level requires adequate rest and respite. It isn't a sign of failure; it's an avenue to success! Asking for and accepting help are wise and brave ways to make sure you can successfully fulfill your caregiving duties.

Be specific. You might look to family members for a break on a regular basis. Members of your faith community or a neighborhood teen needing to work might give you a hand. Coordinate several different helpers so you won't feel you are imposing on anyone and so you have regular opportunities to rejuvenate yourself.

Don't forget to change the channel!

Caring for a relative doesn't mean you must stop enjoying life! Once you have freed up some time, take pleasure in your time off. Take a bubble bath or do something else to reset your frame of mind and let go of any guilt you are feeling.

Then, do something very different with your time. A change of environment and stimulating activities help enhance one's perspective and lessen the feeling of, "caretaking is all there is." Go to a play or out to dinner with a friend. Take a long walk with your family in a lovely park or romp on the beach together. Read on the couch all day while it's pouring rain. Ask your children to bring you breakfast in bed. Or pull up the weeds in your garden. Plant something new. Be creative in your woodshop. Go to a baseball game. Activities and times like these can help you maintain a healthy perspective about your caretaking role, ease resentment and ensure that you have the stamina you need to meet your commitments without burning out.

A Geriatric Care Manager Can Help!

There are many ways to deal with burnout. One obvious way is ignoring your tell-tale physical and emotional symptoms. This can quickly reach a point where you want to throw up her hands, shout "I quit!" and walk out the door. But it doesn't have to get to such a crisis point — you can avoid a well-being calamity of your own by talking to a geriatric care manager.

A care manager can help you:

- Take stock of what is working by evaluating what is comfortable for you and the person you care for. Do you have enough time off? Are logistics a problem? What sort of schedule and assistance would help you feel more comfortable with your role? A care manager can help you sort through these issues and get you moving in the right direction.
- Figure out what is not working, what is difficult, discuss how your feelings and health are suffering, and help uncover what important ingredient is missing in your life. Then, your care manager can design a plan to address these challenges.
- Use your personal wisdom and power to make things better for yourself and others. Your care manager can help you tap into your strengths so you can feel a sense of control over your situation again.



- Examine what can and cannot be changed in the situation. She will help you honestly evaluate where you can give up some of your caretaking duties to others.
- Channel your efforts to those things that can be changed. Your care manager can help you find help from paid caregivers and help you ask for more support at home from your family so you can take some days off.
- Engage your coping tools, old and new. A care manager will explore and help you harness what ways have helped you coped before. She can also give you tips on how to make caregiving a more rewarding experience.
- Find a support group — support groups are a good place to connect with other people experiencing similar challenges, who can identify with your stories and feelings. Participants also share resources, problem solving and strategies.

Don't we all need someone to remind us to take care of ourselves? Doesn't stepping out of isolation and hearing new perspectives sound a bit like jumping on a life raft?

Seek help from a professional like a geriatric care manager who can steer you back on track. A care manager is someone who really listens to you with an experienced, sympathetic ear. She will help you develop an action plan to reduce your stress and discuss alternative care options so you can take a much-needed break. A care manager has the expertise to help you make caretaking less stressful and even enjoyable again.

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