

Taking care of yourself as a caregiver

When someone close to you is diagnosed with cancer, roles, routines, and relationships can change. While you might be focused on the needs of your loved one, the first step in caring for others is caring for yourself. The following tips can help you care for yourself as you support your loved one through cancer treatment.

Understand Your Feelings

There is no right or wrong way for you to feel. It is normal to feel overwhelmed, anxious, sad, angry, and exhausted. Talking with others can help.

Give Yourself Permission

Caregivers often feel guilty about having their own emotions and needs, accepting help from others, and taking time for themselves. It is essential to give yourself permission to feel what you feel and to make time for yourself.

Take 20 Minutes

Don't let go of the activities and people in your life. Even on the busiest days, try to take at least 20 minutes to do something for yourself, whether it is getting coffee with a friend, reading a book, or simply relaxing at home. It doesn't matter how small it is.

Try to Keep Up with Your Own Health Needs

Be physically active whenever you can, eat fruits and vegetables, stay hydrated, and get enough sleep.

Maintain or Start Daily Rituals

Routines and rituals can help ground you in times of emotional stress. Meditation, walking, exercise, and prayer are all examples of daily activities that can provide a sense of continuity and well-being.

Find Ways to Express Your Thoughts and Feelings

Creative outlets such as journaling, drawing, painting, or writing down one word each day to express how you're feeling can relieve stress, clear your mind, and help you communicate with your loved one.

Make a List of Tasks

Write down what you need to do, everything from errands to hospital visits. Divide tasks into two columns:

- (1) things you feel you need to do yourself and
- (2) things you are comfortable asking for help with

Cross off each task when you complete it.

Let Others Help

Keeping balance at work and home while your loved one goes through treatment can be a challenge. It is important to remember that many people around you want to help, and it is never selfish or weak to ask. Remember, asking for help also helps your loved one!

There are several networks you can turn to when you need support, including:

- **Friends and Family:** They can help with tasks like household chores, errands, picking up kids from school, driving your loved one to appointments, cooking, cleaning, and keeping others updated on your loved one's condition. Be specific about how they can help.
- **Your loved one's treatment team:** Doctors, nurses, social workers, and others on the hospital's team are there to help you and your loved one and answer questions. Never be shy about asking for information or help.
- **Respite helpers:** Respite helpers are professionals or volunteers who spend time with your loved one while you run errands or take much-needed time for yourself.

Caregiver Support Groups

Hospitals, community centers, places of worship, and other institutions organize one-on-one and group meet-ups where caregivers share their experiences. Ask your loved one's social worker or search online to find a group that is convenient and close to home. There are also several active online caregiver groups:

- CancerCare offers a list of online groups: cancercaresupport.org/support_groups
- MyLifeline Support Network: mylifeline.org
- Cancer Survivors Network: csn.cancer.org

Oncology Social Work at Mass General Cancer Center

At Mass General Cancer Center, oncology social work services are provided to patients and caregivers at no cost. Oncology social workers provide support, counseling and information about helpful resources. They also lead diagnosis-specific support groups. To reach out to a licensed counselor with experience working with cancer patients and their families, ask your care provider to connect you with the social worker on your team.