

# Care for the Caregiver

by Mitch Golant, PhD, and Natalie Haskins

**I**n our rush and anxiety to care for the person with cancer, caregivers – the husbands, wives, children, friends, and partners on the frontlines battling cancer alongside their diagnosed loved ones – can be overlooked. They can get lost in the maze of very real needs and demands. Indeed, with the profound changes in patient care over the last 10 years – the trend toward community-based medical facilities, shorter hospital stays, and growing survivorship rates – the burden on caregivers has become increasingly significant, making their situation even more difficult.

Caring for a person with cancer can be terribly stressful, so much so that the medical community now refers to this overwhelmed state as the *caregiver syndrome*. Burnout is a very real possibility. The emotional symptoms of burnout may emerge as frustration, anger, emptiness, insecurity, resentment, or depression. Physical symptoms can include headaches, insomnia, backaches, lethargy, lingering colds, gastrointestinal upsets, or cardiovascular problems.

Researchers at The Wellness Community recently conducted an online survey of cancer patients and caregivers. Their findings suggest that caregiver stress deserves much more attention than it has been receiving.



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Eighty percent of the caregivers surveyed said they personally experienced regular distress throughout their loved one's cancer experience.

If you are a caregiver, it's critical that you make your own well-being a priority. While managing your own stress may seem less important than the immediate needs of your loved one

with cancer, it is not. It is hard to be available if you are worn out and experiencing distress yourself.

In order to be helpful to your loved one, you need to know how to cope with your own stress. Think of this as becoming a *strengthened ally*. This is the process of providing aid and comfort through self-care and knowledge. There are many ways to become a strengthened ally and to revitalize your energy:

- ✱ **Get Support** Join a support group. Research shows that talking to people who share your problems reduces stress and alleviates isolation.
- ✱ **Educate Yourself** Understanding the course of the disease, the possibility of relapse, the recommended

## ✱ **Attend to Your Physical Health**

Eat well and get enough sleep. Tend to any physical ailments that arise.

## ✱ **Trigger the Relaxation Response**

Biofeedback, meditation, yoga, listening to music, running, hiking, even washing your car can relieve stress.

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treatments, and the side effects of medications can help you plan for the future.

- ✱ **Keep a Journal** This is where you can dialogue with yourself to vent frustrations and problem-solve without causing conflict.

- ✱ **Maintain Friendships** Continue contacts with friends and family despite your loved one's illness.

- ✱ **Preserve Routines** Retain as much control over the routines of life as is reasonable.

- ✱ **Continue with Hobbies** Don't abandon your favorite pastimes.

- ✱ **Plan for the Future** There is a future in your future.

## ✱ **Remember That Life Goes On**

You are a separate person and are entitled to enjoy your own life. Attend classes, start a hobby, go to a movie, make new friends.

- ✱ **Learn to "Let Go"** Allow yourself to feel replenished by others' gestures – a card or a kind word left on your voicemail. Music, religious services, or a movie can also help you recharge your batteries.

- ✱ **Seek Respite** Realize that you can't do it all. Allow others to do some caring in your stead.

By focusing on breathing, you trigger the mind-body connection.

- ✱ **Deal with Frustration** A short fuse can be a sign of burnout. You may need more emotional support, such as a support group or private therapist.

- ✱ **Focus on Self-Care and Setting Limits** Identify when you're feeling overwhelmed and be firm in delineating what you can and can't do.

Being a strengthened ally means having the ability to derive simple pleasures in the face of uncertainty. It means sharing your fears and struggles with someone you trust. And it can also mean having faith in your loved one's ability to cope.

**Editor's Note:** Dr. Mitch Golant is the senior vice president of Research and Development at The Wellness Community-National and co-author of *The Total Cancer Wellness Guide: Reclaiming Your Life After Diagnosis and What To Do When Someone You Love Is Depressed*. Natalie Haskins is the public education and awareness manager at TWC-National and current manager of *The Star Campaign*, an online initiative to celebrate cancer caregivers.

**Action!** Visit [www.starcampaign.org](http://www.starcampaign.org) to participate in an online caregiving survey and to view the complete results from the survey mentioned in this article. ■