

What is Caregiver Burnout (compassion fatigue)?

At first most caregivers accept their new role as caregiver with a sense of idealism, hope and eagerness to do well. As time goes on fatigue may set in, disappointments and frustrations can and do occur.

Caregiver burnout or compassion fatigue is a sense of being completely overwhelmed and unrewarded (Carter, 1994) and is a common feeling among caregivers.

Many family members fail to realize how mentally and physically exhausting caregiving can be especially if mainly one member of the family is doing the caregiving. It doesn't look that difficult on the outside.

Feeling "burned out" can be dangerous to both you and your loved one. Feeling stressed over long periods of time WILL affect your health, motivation, attitude and mood as well as your ability to cope with your daily responsibilities but it can be avoided and is not permanent.

Caregiver burnout is a result of:

- Having difficulty asking for help
- High expectations of yourself and others
- A strong and unrealistic dedication to making things ideal for the person you are caring for
- Difficulty saying "no"
- Consistently sacrificing yourself and your needs for the benefit of others
- Feeling as though you are the only person capable of providing care

The following are considered WARNING SIGNS of burnout. It is important to take immediate action to improve your health and quality of life.

Common physical symptoms:

- Being unable to sleep well
- Headaches and backaches
- Feeling tired most of the time—physically drained
- Changes in your weight
- Lingering colds

Common emotional symptoms:

- Becoming easily irritated and frustrated
- Feeling anger or resentment
- Sadness and feelings of loneliness
- Feeling overwhelmed or over loaded
- Decreased self-esteem
- Depression
- Feeling emotionally drained

HOW DO YOU AVOID CAREGIVER BURNOUT?

Some suggestions are:

- Let go, one person CANNOT do it alone. You have limitations. It is okay to say "no" to increasing demands. ACCEPT HELP.
- Schedule breaks and private time for YOU. Eat well, get regular sleep and exercise, and participate in activities you find stress relieving.
- Define your limits of what you are prepared and able to do. This will help you see more clearly what is needed and what is realistic for you to provide.
- Take advantage of respite care. Respite care is when a friend, family member, home support worker or hospice volunteer takes care of your loved one while you take a break.
- Join a caregiver's support group to draw strength from others going through a similar experience
- Keep a good sense of humour
- Find spiritual strength. This can be an excellent source of inspiration.
- Appreciate your own efforts. Draw strength and comfort from the dignity, care and love you have provided and remember that it is not your responsibility to "fix it all".

Excerpt material courtesy of Caregivers's Survival Guide—Mid-Island Caregiver's Network—Free full copies containing additional caregiver information are available at AV Hospice Society.