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How to Take Care of Yourself When You Can't Take Care of Yourself

Our columnist searches for new ways to cope as a caregiver



By Elizabeth Bernstein [Follow](#) | Illustrations by Carole Hénaff

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I've been helping to care for my elderly parents for six years.

I consider it a privilege. Yet lately I've felt overwhelmed—exhausted by sustained fear, grief, chaos and, yes, frustration. I know I need time for myself. But that's just not a possibility as I juggle caregiving with work, family and, now, the holidays.

So I sought advice on coping from others who have been through an extended period of caring for a sick or dying loved one. I felt comforted knowing that I'm not alone and buoyed by their message that adjusting their mindset gave them strength when they were at the end of their rope.

“Caregiving is the toughest time in many people's lives,” says Alexandra Drane, the founder and chief executive of Archangels, an organization that

supports unpaid caregivers. “They’re caring for their loved ones, work, kids, families and friends, and it can take them to the breaking point.”

The holidays add even more pressure, Drane says. Caregivers may not be able to participate in celebrations, or may feel pressure to appear festive. For those whose loved one is dying, the cheerful nature of the season can heighten their grief and loneliness.



What helps

The caregivers I spoke with stressed the need to maintain a routine, hard as it may be: Try to sleep enough. Eat healthy foods. Exercise regularly, preferably in nature.

Yet mental strategies are the most effective ways they’ve found to alleviate their anguish—all year

long. They write their feelings down in a journal or talk to friends or mental-health professionals. Some chase laughter, watching funny movies or comedy clips. (Several mentioned dogs!) Many people meditated or prayed.

Allison Gilbert, an author who took care of both of her dying parents, found it helpful to remind herself to be grateful for the time left. Dominick Perrotta, an insurance adjuster who cared for his dying mom, repeated this mantra every time a negative thought popped into his head: “This is not helpful.”

And whenever she became overwhelmed while caring for her dying husband, Deirdre Fagan reminded herself to take things minute-by-minute. “The farther we look back and the farther we look forward, the less happy we are,” says Fagan, a professor who wrote a memoir about her experience.

“If we can manage life 60 seconds at a time, nearly anything becomes manageable.”

Here are some other coping strategies that stood out.



Share your feelings

Pretending that you’re not hurting will just make you feel worse. Telling others what you’re going through—even those you don’t know well—broadens your support network.

Mai Weston, a 47-year-old stay-at-home mom in San Diego, says that she’s a naturally private

person. But as the primary caregiver for both her mother and her father—who is 81 and has end-stage lung cancer—she’s learned that she feels better when truthful about struggling.

When people ask her how she is—even those she doesn’t know well, like other soccer parents—Weston explains that her father is dying and that “it sucks, really, really bad.” Sometimes the response is awkward, but often they want to know more, which she finds comforting. She’s also been frank with her three children, aged 10 to 17, which she believes has helped them cope with their own feelings.

“This has been the hardest experience of my life so far, and expressing that openly has been cathartic,” she says.

Do capacity check-ins

It’s important to listen to your body.

For five years, Tecca Thompson has lived with and cared for her 81-year-old mom, who has dementia. She also takes care of her partner, who has a

chronic health condition. There's little time to take breaks—or money to pay for backup care.



Tecca Thompson with her mom at a parade in Columbus, Ohio, in 2023. TECCA THOMPSON

When she's at her breaking point, Thompson takes short pauses she calls "capacity check-ins." After a difficult doctor's appointment with her mother

recently, Thompson says she felt her whole body tensing up. She took a drive to settle down, stopping to chat with a friend who owns a nearby business.

Thompson says these short breaks help her cope with the tiny losses that hit unexpectedly, such as the time her mom forgot that she loved coffee.

“Caregiving asks you to grieve a little at a time while still showing up every day,” says the 57-year-old, who lives in Columbus, Ohio, and runs a women’s wellness business. “These pauses let me feel those moments instead of pushing through them.”



Set energy boundaries

People who are ill may be down, stressed or angry. You’ll need strategies to prevent yourself from absorbing this heaviness.

When Catherine Duncan’s mother-in-law was dying of pancreatic cancer years ago, she was anxious, scared and deeply sad. As her primary caregiver,

Duncan found herself mirroring her mother-in-law’s energy. She felt locked in a fight-or-flight response.

Then she learned from a holistic doctor how to create an “energy boundary.” One way to do this is to visualize an imaginary bubble surrounding your body that prevents all negative energy from reaching you. (Need more help? Imagine the bubble is covered on the outside with mirrors that reflect any energy coming at you.)

Duncan, a 61-year-old minister in Minneapolis, says that learning to create an energy boundary helped her feel more grounded. “There was still sadness, but I wasn’t overwhelmed,” she says. “And I was better able to be present for my mother-in-law and help her have a peaceful death.”

Consider this sacred time

Several readers said they remained strong by viewing caregiving as a rare and holy opportunity as they helped their loved one transition from life to death.



India Duncan and her husband in Florence, Italy, in 2020. INDIA DUNCAN

When India Duncan's husband was diagnosed with gastric cancer in 2019 at age 55, she reorganized her priorities—dropping all social engagements and hobbies—to take care of him, while also dealing with insurance companies and doctors. The stress made her physically ill.

To cope, Duncan, 61, told herself that her husband's decline and death was a sacred time and that she was part of a spiritual transition. Throughout his two-year illness, she meditated, prayed, talked to her husband about spirituality and recited Buddhist chants for him. That is what she was doing when he died peacefully while she was sitting on his bed.

Duncan, who has sold her home to travel full time in an RV, says that focusing on the sacredness of the experience helped her accept her husband's death. "I knew that I was part of something really important and that it deserved all of me," she says.

No regrets



My caregiver experience started when my dad had a devastating stroke in 2019. We lost him about three years later, but now my mom is critically ill. I've moved in to help her.

What strategies support me? Focusing on the small “wins,” such as a call with a friend, a good laugh, or, especially, mom having a nice day. Being careful

to talk to my partner about something other than caregiving. Daydreaming about a future with less stress. And, as always, cuddling with my dog, Scout.

The biggest boost comes from remembering that this is the daughter I want to be. It's not always easy. Sometimes I have to step outside and breathe deeply or cry. But I'm spending time with, and helping, my mom. I plan to have no regrets.

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Elizabeth Bernstein writes a column for The Wall Street Journal that explores social psychology and the manifold aspects of human interactions. She focuses on how we can best relate—to others and to ourselves....

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