



## The Importance of Self-Care in Caregiving

**“Do unto oneself... as they would do for you...” -anonymous**

With an aging population, shifts in government-funded health services and a growing desire for personal choice, the number of people in our country who find themselves caring for a dying loved one grows significantly each year. Canadian health professionals, social service workers and politicians are beginning to recognize that the burdens of care giving are significant, but still we need to watch out for our own wellbeing.

Caring for a loved one who is severely ill or dying can be a very intimate and fulfilling experience – a lasting if not final gift for someone we love. But when outside help is not present, there can be many health, financial and emotional consequences for those who provide primary care.

### Why is self-care so important?

In short, you can't be everything for someone else. Faced with a diagnosis that someone we deeply care about is dying or will live in a diminished way, it is natural to want to do everything possible to help the person retain the highest level of quality of life. However, our experience at Hospice has shown many family members or friends make sacrifices with physical and/or emotional consequences that actually detract from the quality of care they can provide.

Each of us must commit to our own wellbeing, if we are to successfully help someone else. Tending to our own needs is not selfish. It allows us to last longer in the caregiving role. It usually results in a higher quality of care for those we love.

Unfortunately, a sense of urgency pervades when we are told that time is running out. Often we want to reciprocate or somehow pay back our loved one for everything their life has given us. So we give, and give... and we give. Consequently, burn-out is the most common problem faced by family members who know their loved one is dying.

Often, we deny our own needs, thinking such things as:

- We don't have much time left together.
- No one can do the things I'm doing and certainly not as well.
- It will only be for a short time.
- It is my duty or I just can't leave.

Exhausted, emotionally spent, frazzled, incoherent and sometimes even resentful... these are not the circumstances or qualities that make for good caregiving. But if we do not pay attention to ourselves, they seep in and affect how we interact with those in our care, If we want to be successful In a caregiving role, we must accept personal responsibility for:

- Avoiding feelings of guilt

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- Knowing our limitations.
- Defining boundaries that protect our own wellbeing.
- Asking for assistance.
- Accepting help when offered.

Self care seems simple, something that should come simply... a “*no-brainer*”. However, many caregiver find themselves unable to put their own needs first. They forget that a healthy person can give better care than one who has let themselves succumb to fatigue or emotional drain. They allow unfinished emotional business or family dynamics to dictate their actions. In the end, they do themselves and their loved one a disservice by robbing both of quality time.

There are many factors that lead caregivers to put aside their personal needs. It begs the question, “*Why don’t we do what we know is important?*” More often than not, the answers lie in issues like:

- Time
- Finances
- Martyr complex
- Thinking we should be able to handle it
- Denial
- No one else to help – can’t / won’t
- Priorities

The reality is that WE need to prioritize OURSELVES if we are to ensure we truly give good care to anyone else. It is not ego-centric. It is not selfish. It is a best practice that helps us avoid a whole host of negative outcomes including:

#### **Physical**

- Exhaustion
- Gastro-intestinal problems
- Sighing
- Feeling of weight in limbs/on chest
- Headaches
- Muscle aches
- Changes in sleeping and eating patterns
- Nightmares

#### **Intellectual or Cognitive**

- Unfocussed thinking
- Inability to make decisions
- Trouble comprehending new information
- Distractibility
- Forgetfulness
- Questioning your self and others
- Intrusive thoughts “I can’t do this anymore”, “I wish it was over”, “No one understands”, “Nothing is good”

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