



Stress Reduction For Caregivers

Caregiver stress, caregiver burnout, caregiver meltdown -- there are many different words we use to describe that feeling when you just can't go on caring any longer, when you are beyond exhaustion, drained of all physical, spiritual and emotional reserves. Stress does more than just affect our moods, it can even threaten physical health.

The best way to deal with stress is to prevent it from becoming overwhelming in the first place. Don't wait until you are at your wit's end to start learning how to deal with stress.

Take a look at these simple tips and techniques to prevent life's frustrations from controlling how you feel. You will probably be a better caregiver if you are not feeling overwhelmed or resentful.

Exercise

Even a small amount of exercise every week can help you handle your anxieties much more effectively. Before you start exercising, think about the type of workout that would be the most fun for you.

The more you enjoy exercising, the more likely you'll stick with it. For example, you could try walking three or four times a week through your neighborhood or on a trail at the park, just for ten minutes or so.

Explain to your spouse how important it is that he cares for mom for these few minutes each day. Telling yourself "I'll start tomorrow," or "Next week I'll sign up," is a sure way to keep from getting started.

When you find an exercise that appeals to you, begin it as soon as possible. Your new activity will provide you with something to look forward to, and your body will thank you for the exercise.

Tips on choosing and sticking with an exercise plan:

- Invite a friend or exercise partner to start with you.
- The companionship can be an added pleasure and encourage you to be consistent.
- Make a plan, but choose a realistic time. If at all possible, keep that time protected in your schedule.
- Write the exercise plan schedule on your calendar.
- Keep track of how successful you are with your plan.
- Learn how to breathe properly

Many of us, especially when we're under stress, tend to breathe poorly. Most of us are "chest breathers", meaning that we pull upward with our shoulders and upper chest to inhale. When we do this, less oxygen reaches our bloodstream and brain than our body likes.

The result is often that our heart rate goes up and we become more tense. Breathing more deeply requires using the diaphragm muscle, taking a deep breath by expanding the whole chest and belly, and breathing more slowly.

This induces a more appropriate carbon dioxide-oxygen exchange in your blood, which leads to a feeling of relaxation.

To understand how proper breathing feels, either lie down or sit, and place one hand on your belly and the other on your chest. Inhale through your nose and count silently to three, making the hand on your belly rise. The hand on your chest should barely move. Then exhale slowly.

So next time mom calls you from her room asking for yet another glass of water, watch your breathing. Before you let the stress tip you over the edge, take a deep breath, count slowly to ten before you respond or reach. You may be surprised how much better you feel.

Mind-calming techniques

Yoga is a wonderful way to relax your body and release stress by using breath, movement and body control. Meditation can help you relax your mind and body, too, and helps you develop greater control over your thoughts and worries. Or find a quiet place, and for a just a few minutes think of an image that relaxes you- maybe, a beach with a warm breeze or a happy memory.

Another simple way to calm your mind is to distract yourself -- go to a movie, play a sport, immerse yourself in a hobby, listen to some favorite music. It cannot be emphasized enough how important it is that caregivers spend some quality time alone every week, doing exactly what it is you like to do.

Watch what you eat

Studies show that certain foods can help reduce stress, like complex carbohydrates -- pasta, potatoes -- that are more slowly absorbed. Maybe that's why we call them comfort foods! The main thing is that you don't want to not eat.

Often when people are stressed, especially when they're feeling down, they tend to stop to eating. When your body is deprived of nutrients for a long period of time it too becomes stressed. In terms of what you eat, stay away from the usual villains like sugary snacks. Watch the coffee and the hidden stimulants in things like medicines, soda and some of the bottled waters that contain excessive caffeine.

The tips above are things you can do in your home, and without too much disruption to your daily routine. But don't forget that there may well be lots of services in your community already in place to help you cope with the pressures of care-giving ranging from counseling to adult day care and respite care services.