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7 Ways Family Caregivers Can Combat Compassion Fatigue

Guidelines from an expert who's also had personal experience

By [Stephen Chee](#) | August 18, 2020 | [Caregiving](#)

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As family caregivers, we strive each day to deliver compassionate care to our loved ones. But we're often at risk of burnout, especially during the pandemic.



that the rates of symptoms of anxiety disorder and depression as well as serious consideration of suicide have been [much higher for unpaid family caregivers](#) than the public in general lately.

Physical, mental and emotional exhaustion can reduce our effectiveness in caring not only for our loved ones but also for ourselves. The result? "[Compassion fatigue](#)." I know this personally, having served as an at-home caregiver for my dad for many years.

Adapting to the new normal for caregivers is a lot like climbing Mount Everest. As we ascend the tall demands of caregiving, coupled with the stresses of day-to-day life and the uncertainties of a [global pandemic](#), we are increasingly at risk of depletion. Often, we focus so intently on our goal — caring for the loved one who needs us — that we neglect caring for ourselves. Sleep suffers, worries compound and a range of health issues may eventually emerge.

If we fail to care for ourselves first, we will be ineffective in caring for others.

Yet, despite the difficulties, something within pushes us forward. That's because being a family caregiver requires a special heart.

Like climbing a steep precipice, reaching our goal demands careful preparation, resilient stamina and essential skills for navigating difficult conditions. Here are seven guidelines to reach our destination without hurting ourselves and to combat compassion fatigue:

1. Take Care to Give Care

Many family caregivers have trouble asking for help. Their perspective is, "I will crash and burn before saying what I need for myself. My job is to *care for*, not to *be cared for*."



Remember these three principles: We must receive before we can give; we must learn not to put ourselves last and we must be kind to ourselves by taking time to rest, recharge and recover.

2. Plan Each Day

An essential component of being an effective caregiver aligns with the first step in being a successful mountain climber: planning the journey.

In caregiving, it's a four-step process:

1. Choose your planning medium, either a physical planner or a digital calendar, such as Google or Outlook .
2. Schedule a one-hour weekly planning session for yourself on a specific day and at a time most convenient for you.
3. Block off time for each daily activity beyond caregiving, such as maintaining your work schedule, shopping, exercising, sleeping, having quiet time, nurturing your spiritual practices, keeping doctors' appointments and spending time with family and friends.
4. Be flexible and realistic, leaving room in your life for unexpected events.

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express ourselves, nurture our social relationships, cope with stress and use emotional information to make better decisions.

When we're below threshold physically, emotionally and spiritually, day by day we shift into survival mode. It's impossible to cultivate emotional intelligence in this state of running on empty.

The Harvard Business Review article, "[On Emotional Intelligence](#)," offers an assessment tool, based on five domains and competencies: self-awareness, positive outlook, self-control, adaptability and [empathy](#).

To cultivate these qualities, the article says:

- Practice active listening to determine the options and preferences of others
- Communicate effectively, understanding others' intents and motives to build trust and rapport over time
- Watch the tempo of your thoughts and words; slow down
- Continue to multitask while "holding space," meaning being present to others
- Be mindful of your tone and body language
- Stay motivated, driven by a sense of purpose to accomplish your daily tasks
- Be open to feedback and new ideas

What is the secret sauce for sustaining emotional intelligence? Empathy, the ability to understand and share the feelings of another.

Empathy is needed not only in caring for others, but in loving and forgiving ourselves.

4. Follow the Caregiver's Bill of Rights

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To help family caregivers better care for themselves, the Family Caregiver Alliance has compiled what it calls [A Caregiver's Bill of Rights](#).

Its preamble reminds caregivers to be honest about what you need, including the right to:

- Take time for yourself; it's not selfish, it's necessary
- Know your capacity; always strive to leave 10% "in the tank" and say no when you're running low
- Manage your time in a way that works best for you
- Receive compassion from others
- Ask for help
- Acknowledge which environments drain you and which ones restore you
- Recognize your "emotional load," weighing energy input against energy output

5. Build Your Support Network

It also helps to consult with your confidants.

Develop a trusted inner circle, including family members, close friends, co-workers, mentors, counselors, and faith and support groups, with whom you can openly share.

6. Seek Physical, Mental and Emotional Recovery

Restore your body; refresh your mind and spirit.



A recent University of Buffalo study found that [sleep significantly influences the effectiveness of care that caregivers provide to dementia and Alzheimer's patients](#). According to the research, caregivers with poorer sleep quality experienced more fatigue and less energy. As care recipient functionality decreased, caregiver fatigue increased and energy decreased.

Mental and emotional recovery activities include quiet time; artistic pursuits such as drawing, painting and singing; walks in nature; spiritual nourishment and journaling.

Journaling simply means: Write down the things you are thankful for.

7. Celebrate and Have Fun

When we take time to care for ourselves, being a family caregiver can bring us great joy. So, celebrate your caring heart. Make room for laughter.

Focus on the five activities that bring body, mind and spirit into equilibrium: love, care, thanksgiving, compassion and forgiveness.

The most effective mantra to surmount compassion fatigue? *Don't be your own worst enemy*. Instead, be your own best friend. Speak kindly to yourself and give yourself grace.

When we befriend ourselves, we can love and serve others more abundantly.

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Stephen Chee is director of employee wellness at Lifetime Wellness, a provider of wellness services to senior living communities. He also served for many years as an at-home caregiver for his father. [Read More](#)

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