



Self-Care for the Caregiver

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Caregiving can be physically and emotionally exhausting. Whether you are in the profession of caregiving or taking care of a loved one, it is important to remember to recharge your batteries. For family members, caregiving can also lead to additional pressures, such as financial strain, family conflict, and social withdrawal. Over time, caregiver stress can lead to burnout, a condition marked by irritability, fatigue, problems with sleep, weight gain, feelings of helplessness or hopelessness, and social isolation.

Caregiver burnout is an example of how repeated exposure to stress harms mental and physical health. Chronic stress triggers a release of stress hormones in the body, which can lead to exhaustion, irritability, a weakened immune system, digestive distress, headaches, pains, and weight gain, especially in the midsection of the body.

Your body does have a natural way to combat stress. The counter-stress system is called the “relaxation response,” regulated by the parasympathetic nervous system. You can purposefully activate the relaxation response through mind-body practices like yoga, tai chi, meditation, and deep relaxation techniques.

5 ways to care for yourself if you are a caregiver

1. Self-compassion is essential to self-care.

Being kind to yourself builds the foundation to self-care. Self-compassion means giving yourself credit for the tough, complex work of caregiving, stepping away from the self-critical, harsh inner voice, and allowing yourself time — even if it's just a few minutes a day — to take care of yourself.

Lack of time or energy can make getting that time away particularly challenging. You may even feel guilty or selfish for paying attention to your own needs. What you need to know is this: *in fact, practicing self-care allows the caregiver to remain more balanced, focused, and effective, which helps everyone involved.*

2. Practice simple breath awareness for 10 minutes a day.

One of the simplest deep relaxation techniques is breath awareness. We go over breath awareness, paced breathing, and other breath techniques in [The Harvard Medical School Guide to Yoga](#). Here is one you can try:

- Find a comfortable seated position on a chair or cushion.
- Close your eyes and begin to notice your breath.
- It is common to have distracting thoughts come and go, but just let them pass, and gently bring your attention back to your breath.
- Breathe in slowly through your nose for five counts, hold and pause for five counts,* and exhale for five counts.
- Continue for 10 minutes. You may substitute phrases for the counts such as:

I breathe in calm and relaxing energy.

I pause to let the quiet energy relax my body.

I breathe out and release any anxious or tense energy.

- For deeper relaxation, gradually extend your exhalation, until you reach an exhalation twice the length of the inhalation (10 counts).

**Breathing exercises should not be painful or uncomfortable; if holding your breath is uncomfortable, just eliminate the pause between the inhalation and exhalation.*

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3. Try a mind-body practice like yoga, tai chi, meditation, and deep relaxation techniques.

Mind-body practices not only build physical health, but also deepen the awareness and connection between the mind and body. Yoga has been shown to reduce stress in caregiving groups, like family of those with [Alzheimer's disease](#) and [cancer](#). We describe yoga breathing, poses, and meditation techniques in The [Harvard Medical School Guide to Yoga](#).

Mindfulness meditation and deep relaxation techniques can reduce stress. Guided audio meditations are available online: [UCLA Mindfulness Awareness Research Center](#), smartphone apps like Headspace, Meditation Oasis, or Insight Timer.

4. Make eating well and getting quality sleep priorities.

It's easy to forget about your own meals and needs when trying to help others. Maintaining adequate sleep and nutrition are key to preventing caregiver burnout. Build a daily 10-minute nighttime routine to achieve more restful sleep. Your nighttime routine can include your breathing exercises, meditation, or [yoga poses](#). Missing meals can lead to irritability and fatigue, so it is important to eat regularly scheduled meals throughout the day.

Nutrition can also be an important factor to prevent burnout. Chronic stress has been linked to increased inflammation in the body, so it is helpful to avoid foods that are processed or high in refined sugars, which increase inflammation in the body. Avoid or reduce alcohol, since alcohol both increases inflammation in the body and disrupts quality of sleep.

5. Remain socially connected. Find support through local caregiver support groups.

While it can be difficult to keep social appointments with friends and family in the face of medical caretaking, it is important to maintain social connections to feel less isolated and prevent burnout.

Realizing that you're not alone and that others are going through similar experiences nurtures your ability to be self-compassionate. Hospitals and local organizations often offer caregiver support groups for family and caregivers.

Employee Assistance of the Pacific has a variety of resources readily available for Hawaii caregivers. These resources are available at no charge to covered employees and their family members, and are completely confidential. Employees with EAP (Employee Assistance Program) coverage, and Physicians and Healthcare Workers with PAP (Physician Assistance Program) coverage can call the numbers below 24/7 for caregiver support, professional counseling and coaching, management consultation, legal and financial consultation, and healthcare navigation/eldercare assistance to help you deal with work or life challenges.

We understand the importance of supporting caregivers, the variety of ways this can impact your life and your work, and look forward to helping you any way we can! Call us today at the numbers below. Counselors are available across the Hawaiian Islands.

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