


A young woman with dark hair pulled back, wearing a purple long-sleeved top with a small bow on the shoulder, is smiling warmly as she assists an elderly woman. The elderly woman has short, curly grey hair and is wearing a light-colored, textured sweater. She is seated in a wheelchair, looking upwards and to the right. The background is a simple, brightly lit indoor space with a white wall and a doorway.

Care. for Caregivers

Taking care of a sick or aging family member is an act of love. For many, it is also an act of exhaustion.

Sara Rowe shares advice, resources, and encouragement for those caring for their loved ones.



Within a month of their marriage in 1999, Terri Corcoran's husband, Vince, began to have cognitive issues and falling spells. However, it was not until 2004 that he was diagnosed with Fragile X-Associated Tremor Ataxia Syndrome, which left him physically and mentally disabled. At this time Terri was forced to leave her job to care for all his needs full-time, with the assistance of aides.

Like many other caregivers, Corcoran has faced a number of challenges. "The emotional aspect has been the hardest—losing so much of my brilliant, loving husband," says Terri of her husband, who was formerly a Ph.D. laser scientist. "Aside from his not being able to do anything, it is very lonely and devastating to have so little communication with my husband."

Caregiving takes a toll on caregivers, whether they are caring for a parent, spouse, child, or other loved one. Some are also facing the challenge of raising children and taking care of aging parents simultaneously. But all caregivers find it is difficult to remain courageous and compassionate when frustrations get the better of them. However, there is hope and support available for those in the role of caregiver.

Find joy.

It is often difficult to retain a positive attitude and find joy while caregiving. Melissa Veselovsky, a patient navigator at Ironwood Cancer and Research Centers, who has worked with many cancer patients and their caregivers, believes joy is an essential component to caregivers' survival. "Caregivers forget to smile, laugh, and find joy in the world around them," she says. "What is happening to their loved one is not funny and not a cause for joy, but there are still things in life that are. Joy and laughter help ease tension and lower blood pressure." She suggests keeping a notebook or box of things that make you smile, and scheduling time with family and friends who make you laugh.

Take Care of Yourself

Melissa Veselovsky says, "I think of a caregiver as a tree that bears good fruit, but a tree cannot provide fruit for others if its own roots and leaves are not healthy."

Remember to do the following to keep yourself healthy:

- *Get adequate sleep, exercise regularly, and eat healthfully.*
- *Take time for hobbies and activities that you love, or find new ones that fit into your schedule.*
- *Take "time-outs" in which you reenergize by praying, watching a funny video clip, or reading a chapter from a good book.*
- *Spend time away from the individual you are caring for with close friends and family who can encourage you, distract you, and raise your spirits.*
- *Build a support network of people or organizations you can call on when you have questions or are burnt-out.*

Find hope.

Many caregivers find strength in the power source of their faith and spirituality. Author of the e-book *Your Creed of Care: How to Dig for Treasure in People (Without Getting Buried Alive)* and a caregiver for the faith-based nonprofit L'Arche, Caroline McGraw has found that embracing faith and finding inner peace is a crucial part of caregiving. Her personal prayer is always "Help me do the next right thing."

"Caregivers can use faith and spirituality as a source of strength by providing hope, guidance, comfort, reassurance, and role models," says Veselovsky. "I often recommend that they pray for strength, hope, joy, and peace. It can be as simple as strength to do another load of laundry, hope for a mailbox without bills, joy for the day, and peace through the night."

Veselovsky also recommends finding encouragement from the books of Proverbs, Corinthians, Psalms, and Ruth (in which Ruth is a caregiver for her mother-in-law Naomi).

Maintain the relationship.

Terri Corcoran's relationship with the man she fell in love with changed drastically when his physical and mental health began to decline. "In the beginning, I did not understand how I could possibly have any kind of marriage to a man with dementia who couldn't even remember my name," she says. "I've learned that our marriage is so special because we love each other through the challenges . . . holding his hand still feels like the same



Do not be a perfectionist; prioritize what is most important and realize that you can't do everything you will think you should be doing.

old guy to me and gives me great comfort.”

It can be difficult to maintain a healthy, loving relationship with the individual you are caring for, but do remember to spend quality time with them outside the time spent on their physical needs. Watch a favorite TV show together, look through old pictures, or take an outing to a place they would enjoy. Find activities that you would enjoy participating in together.

Don't lose yourself.

Caregiving can drain your physical, mental, and

Advice From Fellow Caregivers

“My mantra: ‘good is good enough.’ If you’re expecting to be the perfect caregiver . . . you’re on the wrong planet.”

—April Fan, caregiver for her parents and founder of www.seniorresourcecentral.com

“I find the support that I need as a caregiver are given via taking time for myself: writing, reaching out, and resting. Asking for help is not optional, but essential. . . . You don’t have to be a superhero. You get to be a human being, and being human is about reciprocity: loving and being loved, needing help and giving help.”

—Caroline McGraw, professional caregiver

“If you are caring for a loved one 24/7, you are doing a beautiful, loving thing, and you should never feel guilty that you’re not doing enough.”

—Terri Corcoran, caring for her husband, Vince

emotional energy. It is important to have time for yourself during which you can recharge. Not only will this keep you healthy, it allows you to be able to have more to give to those you are caring for.

“Losing your sense of self in caring for another person is a treacherous road that will dead-end when you least expect it,” says McGraw. “You need to be able to give care without feeling as though your responsibilities are crushing you.”

Many caregivers feel guilty or selfish for taking time for themselves or saying no, but maintaining boundaries makes it possible to remain effective in your caregiving. Corcoran says it is important to recognize when you are reaching the point of burn-out: “Try to take a break, even a short one, until you feel rebalanced. Do not be a perfectionist; prioritize what is most important and realize you can’t do everything you will think you should be doing.”

Ask for help.

A common mistake caregivers make is taking on the full burden of care for a loved one. There are actually many modes of assistance available to caregivers. Some insurances and long-term care coverage plans take care of many costs for in-home care. Many churches, senior centers, and nonprofits offer caregiving assistance, meals, and other services for little to no charge. And often friends and family want to help, but will know how to best do so only if you ask for what you need.

Caregiving can be very lonely and isolating, so

Resources for Caregivers

American Cancer Society

www.cancer.org

Local resources such as transportation programs, medical and food assistance, and support groups for cancer patients and their caregivers

The Wellness Community

www.thewellnesscommunity.org

Groups, education, and activities for cancer patients and their caregivers

The Senior Resource Central

www.seniorresourcecentral.com

Videos, articles, advice, and resources for those caring for seniors

VA Caregiver Support

www.caregiver.va.gov

Resources and helpline for those caring for veterans

USA Government Caregiver Resources

<http://www.usa.gov/Citizen/Topics/Health/caregivers.shtml>

The government's list of resources for caregivers

Medicare

www.medicare.gov/caregivers

Information for those caring for seniors


Today's Caregiver

www.caregiver.com

A leading source of information and resources for caregivers

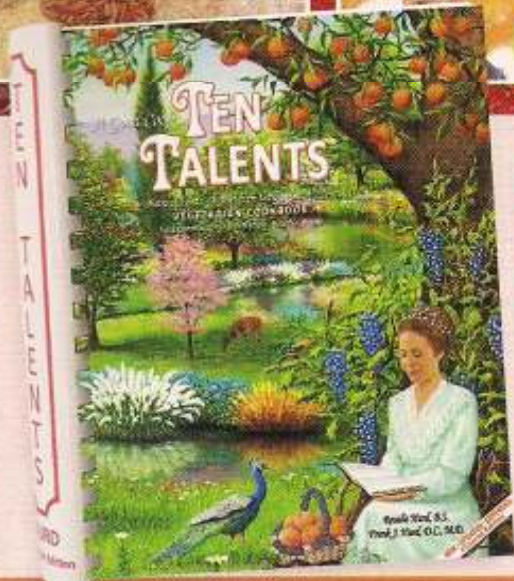


it is important to find encouragement and comfort in other people who are going through the same struggles. You can connect with other caregivers through online forums, support groups, or activities run specifically for caregivers. Corcoran, who attends

a support group for spousal caregivers, says, "It is so comforting to be with people who are going through the same trials, struggling with lost hopes of marriage to a 'normal' partner, and dealing with all the medical and financial issues we face." 

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