

SELF-CARE FOR CAREGIVERS

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Most of us aren't trained professional caregivers. We were thrown into this role because of life's unexpected twists and turns. We try to do our best, but it's easy to feel like you aren't doing a good job or burnout because of the stress and exhaustion.

Here are some helpful hints on how to take care of yourself when you're caring for a loved one, drawn from my own experience after my husband, David, was burned. I hope it gives you some practical ways to take care of yourself—or offer ways to support a friend or family member who has taken on the huge responsibility of caring for someone after a burn injury.

1. Learn as Much as You Can So You Can Be Your Loved One's Advocate.

Trust your instincts. If you have a concern or notice something that just doesn't seem right, it's ok to speak up—and do so immediately. Speak to someone directly involved in the care of your loved one, such as your doctor, physical therapist, burn nurse, or nurse manager. Be specific and clear about your concerns and expectations, so the hospital knows how to best help.

When David was in the burn unit, there was an aide that was a bit brash and tended to be a little too rough with her patients. I went to the unit's Nurse Manager and explained my fears and concerns. I told her I didn't want this particular aide working with my husband. My concerns were heard, and changes were made.

2. You Don't Have to Do It All. Ask for Help From Family and Friends—and Be Willing to Accept Help!

Trust me, I know this is not an easy thing to do! We like to be the ones helping others as opposed to having people help us, but don't let pride get in the way. Accept assistance with transporting kids to their activities, allow neighbors or friends to drop off meals, and accept help with yard work, housework, or even laundry. If you have kids, assign them appropriate tasks as well. If possible, consider hiring medical staff or other professionals to assist with home health care such as daily wound care, physical therapy, and bathing.

3. Help Your Loved One Maintain as Much of Their Independence as Possible.

When you allow your loved one to do some things for themselves, it helps them maintain a sense of dignity and control, and it allows you to do one less thing. I used to purposefully turn David's t-shirts inside out when I was folding laundry so he would have to turn them the correct way before trying to dress himself. I wasn't doing this to be mean. He needed to move his hands and arms, and this was a way he could get some extra therapy in. It also gave him a sense of accomplishment! I found times when it was safe for me to step back and let him do things.

4. Take Care of Yourself Physically, Emotionally, and Spiritually.

Get rest, eat, and get some fresh air every day. Call a friend. Exercise. Go for a walk. Read. Watch a movie. Pick what works for you. It sometimes felt like I was being selfish by putting my needs ahead of David's or our kid's needs. However, if I didn't take care of myself, I wouldn't be of any use to any of them.

It's not being selfish—it's being practical. Simple exercise and activity can help alleviate stress. Make sure you eat regularly. Take a break and go for a walk. Go outside and get some fresh air. Just a shift in your physical setting can help give you a mental break. And don't forget to get sleep! Sleep is critical for your physical and mental health so you can best care for your loved one.

5. Get Support From Counseling or Support Groups.

It's difficult to effectively care for your loved one if you are suffering emotionally and physically, too. Find a network with others who've experienced a similar situation. It just helps to know you're not the only one that's ever been through this.

We found the Phoenix Society for Burn Survivors within the first year. Phoenix Society offers trained peer supporters for survivors and loved ones. Teaming up with them gave us an instant sense of community. We belonged simply because we'd all gone through a similar experience. I didn't have to explain anything to anyone because they knew what we were struggling with on a daily basis.

6. Deal With Your Feelings.

It's ok to have feelings of anxiety, worry, anger, guilt, fear, despair... Grieve over what you've lost. Find what is healthy and fits you best in terms of expressing or coping with your feelings. This might be talking with a close friend, writing a list of fears vs. realistic options, or writing in a journal.

I kept a journal to try to sort out my feelings. Sometimes I didn't feel like I could voice my feelings to anyone because I wanted to make sure everyone thought I was ok, but in order to deal with my emotions, I needed to release them on paper. This practice helped me not suppress my emotions. I also had regular visits with a counselor.

7. Try to Stay Connected to Your Friends and Life Outside of Caring for Your Loved One.

It's ok to take a break, as hard as it might seem. Don't cut yourself off from the outside world. It may be tempting, especially when you're overwhelmed with everything that needs to be done. On occasion, we would have a "Girls' Night Out / Guys' Night In" evening. David's friends would come over to our house to grill steaks and watch action movies while I went out to dinner with my friends. Those were great moments, and it gave us a chance to laugh once in a while.

Here are some other ways to stay connected:

- Go out for lunch with a friend or have them bring lunch to you so you can visit.
- Call a friend, parent, or other close relatives just to chat. Take time to reach out and hear a friendly voice.
- Take a mini-trip. Maybe leave the hospital and go home for a day or two. Go visit a friend if someone else can stay with your loved one.

Although this list is simple, I hope that it may offer you some practical help to a situation that may seem too big to handle. Taking care of others is no small task, but it's a precious one. It's important for caregivers to take care of themselves so they can continue to care for their loved ones. If we aren't healthy, we can't help others heal.

Carly Bowers and her husband, David, are the founders of Bowers Ministry and co-authors of Walk Through Fire: One Couple's Journey of Finding Joy in the Midst of Tragedy. In 1999, their lives were forever changed when David was severely burned in an oxygen flash fire and was not expected to survive his injuries. The healing process has been an ongoing battle, but through it all, they have learned that there is a purpose for their pain. They try to encourage others facing hardship, especially families impacted by a burn injury. Carly and David are long-time volunteers with Phoenix Society for Burn Survivors and love to travel and share their story with groups.

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