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Family Caregiver Resources

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Conquering guilt. Becoming resilient.

Guilt is the constant companion of family caregivers. It seems like you are never doing enough. The truth is, you never will. The list will never “get done,” and there will always be people asking more of you than you can give. Feeling guilty usually leads to burnout. Instead, consider these tips for greater resilience, appropriate boundaries, and how to say no graciously.

The resilient family caregiver



As a family caregiver, you probably hold yourself to a very high standard. You expect yourself to react with kindness and patience at all times, no matter how unpleasant or inconvenient the task. But some days are admittedly better than others. And then comes the self-criticism and guilt!

Here’s an idea, though: Why not treat yourself the way you would

treat a friend? Research shows that people who treat their own distress with concern instead of judgment are physically healthier. They are also emotionally better able to deal with life’s inevitable setbacks. For example, people who treat themselves with compassion

- **cope with failure more productively.** Rather than get upset, they consider the lessons learned.
- **remain positive and motivated.** They are less subject to fear, negativity, anxiety, and depression.
- **take better care of personal health.** They eat better, exercise more, and see the doctor regularly.

The next time you feel down on yourself, try a compassionate perspective.

- **Kindness.** You forgot to bring the list of medications to dad’s appointment? Self-criticism will only make you feel worse. And it won’t make the list suddenly appear. Instead, patiently ask yourself what to do next.
- **Acceptance.** You’re not keeping up with cleaning mom’s house the way you envisioned? Give up the idea of perfection. It’s not humanly possible! How would you respond to a friend? Gently support yourself the same way and continue to do your best.
- **Awareness.** You missed the party today because dad wasn’t well? Of course you are disappointed! And maybe mad, or sad. Acknowledge your feelings in the moment. They are normal, natural. And, like all feelings, they will subside. They just resolve faster when viewed as neither bad nor good, but rather, as a temporary experience.



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Too much empathy?



Our brains are predisposed to feel the emotions of others. This capacity, called "empathy," fuels our most altruistic acts as humans. It fosters sweeter, deeper relationships.

But it is possible to be overly empathetic. If the doorway to your heart is always open to feeling your loved one's pain, sadness, anger, fear, you are on a sure path to burnout. And guilt, as your loved one inevitably declines.

Signs of too much empathy

- **Inability to identify your own needs or feelings.** Can you answer these questions: "What am *I* feeling right now?" "What would *I* like to do?" "What do *I* need?" If not, you may be overly empathetic.
- **Unexplained physical or psychological exhaustion.** Taking on the emotions of others is deeply tiring.
- **Generalized anxiety (overwhelm) and low-level depression.** A lack of boundaries leaves you at the mercy of another person's situation. Feeling powerless is a precursor to anxiety and depression.

What you can do

Retain your compassion: care deeply but hold enough self-awareness that you don't lose your own identity.

- **Pay attention to your body's signals.** Do you get tense when someone you care about is troubled? Learn to distinguish between your own feelings and the distress of another.
- **Practice relaxation techniques.** Release physical and emotional tension with deep breathing, guided imagery, or progressive relaxation.
- **Get support from others.** Talk with other family caregivers to gain perspective. They share your need to care and to set healthy personal boundaries.
- **Keep track of things you do for yourself.** It's easy to unconsciously ignore your own needs. The upshot is burnout, and then everyone loses. Strive for balance. Each day do at least one thing just for you.

Setting limits, nicely

Many of us were raised to believe that the only polite or kind answer is "yes." But as Dr. Christine Carter, a UC Berkeley researcher, notes, "If you find yourself saying 'yes' when you mean 'no,' it's a recipe for overwhelm and exhaustion." Not to mention resentment, guilt, burnout, and ill health!

Ironically, research shows that the busier we are, the more we tend to say "yes." Saying "yes" makes us feel generous. The consequences—becoming stressed and overburdened by the commitment—are down the road. We'd rather overlook those realities than feel stingy or selfish right now by setting limits and saying "no."

According to Dr. Carter, there are three steps to saying "no" gracefully:

- **Rehearse saying "no."** There is a process. First, avoid comparing your needs to the other person's. Then, train yourself to think through how you will feel when the day of reckoning comes. Recall the last time you overextended yourself and ended up sick. Or ended up too tired to do something you were looking forward to. Finally, practice a few phrases that you can readily use, no extra thinking required.
- **Be truthful, but vague.** Having a response you feel confident in makes it more likely that you will use it. You don't have to justify yourself. (Too much detail and the requester will start problem solving to help you find the time!) A simple "I wish I could, but that doesn't work for me at this time" is an effective standby. Or if you would genuinely like to help, "I can't do 'X' next Thursday, but I could do 'Y' the week after that."
- **Make your decision final.** If the person pushes you, repeat the same phrase. This way you signal that you aren't going to change your mind. If they insist, then be honest about how their pressure makes you feel: uncomfortable, perhaps even hurt or angry.

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