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Family Caregiver Resources

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Aging well in

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Common caregiving emotions: Worry, anger, negativity

For family caregivers, it's easy to get caught up in a cycle of gloom and worry. Even anger. So much is happening that is beyond your control. Plus, your caregiving responsibilities likely gobble up what time you might have to recharge, enjoy friends, or remember you are more than a family caregiver. Here are strategies to help you manage these strong emotions effectively. If your feelings seem overwhelming, seek the support of a counselor.

Curb your negative thinking



As humans, we are hard wired to pay more attention to what's not working than to what is going well.

For instance, dwelling on a parent's growing weakness and instability rather than on his or her positive attitude.

This tendency to notice the negative can help us learn from mistakes and avoid preventable problems.

But it's also easy to get stuck in negativity, mired in depression and anxiety.

Examples of negativity

- **All-or-nothing thinking.** It's all good or all bad: "If I don't get Dad to do all his exercises, the doctor will think I don't even try."
- **Catastrophizing.** "I just know she's going to break her hip."
- **Trash-talking yourself.** "I can never make Mom comfortable like my sister can."

How can you turn your negative thoughts around?

- **Don't try to stop them.** Trying to suppress them actually gives them more power.
- **Recognize and accept that you are in a funk.** Take a step outside yourself and notice that you are being negative: "Oh, I'm in my negative thinking mode again."
- **Ask yourself if your thoughts are helping.** Are you actually moving toward an action plan to change something?
- **Challenge the thoughts.** Put them to the "truth test." Are you truly incompetent? Have you *never* done something well? Strive for a balanced view of the situation.
- **Schedule time to recharge your own batteries.** Have lunch with a friend, take a walk



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around town, explore something that interests you locally.

- **What would you tell a friend?** We are often kinder to others than we are to ourselves. Any reason you don't deserve the advice you'd give a friend?



"Sometimes I feel furious!"



Anger as an emotion is neither good nor bad. It is a messenger. It can provide energy and motivate you to action. But anger by itself has never solved a problem.

The trouble with anger rests on how you respond to its message. Ideally, you want to harness that energy for finding constructive solutions to the situation. But in the midst of seeing red, that can be hard to do.

Use these strategies to short-circuit your anger before it gets out of hand:

- **Know your physical signs of anger.** A faster heart rate. Sudden heat. Tense muscles/jaw. A knot in the stomach. Once you learn the signs, you'll be better prepared to interrupt an escalation when you start feeling irritated, frustrated, or annoyed.
- **Take a time out.** Remove yourself from the situation. Go for a ten-minute walk if you can. Or at least to the bathroom or the back porch. Counteract the fight-or-flight response with slow, deep breathing.
- **Get some exercise.** Burn off the adrenaline of anger through movement. Again, a brisk walk is great! Or put on some dance music and move!
- **Focus on your senses.** Concentrate on the sensations in your body. This reduces the intensity of your emotions. What are you seeing? Smelling? How does your body feel?
- **Count to ten.** If you can't physically create distance, at least give your logical mind some time to catch up with your emotions. Count to ten before you say or do something you will regret later.
- **Seek solutions when you are calm.** You don't have to bury your anger. But let it chill for a bit. The conversation and solutions you explore later will be much more fruitful if you do.

When worrying doesn't stop

Worry is useful when it calls us to action. But it's a problem when it becomes an ongoing state of mind. It can become a habit, bringing tension and stress.

If you're a worrier, you may have mixed feelings. It may seem that worry

- keeps you on your toes, yet it
- makes you edgy and distracted, interfering with your sleep and peace of mind.

Relieving the stress of worry doesn't mean you have to stop worrying. Here are some strategies to harness the positives of worry and keep the rest in balance:

- **Don't try to give it up.** Instead, do it consciously and take notes! Schedule a 45-minute "worry time" for yourself every day. If a worry pops up at another time, write it down for review during your next worry period.
- **Clarify what is fact and what is emotion.** Hint: Facts are in the present tense. ("Dad seems tired and is coughing a lot.") Emotional concerns often have a "future" component involving a problem that *might* happen ("What if it's lung cancer?")
- **Create a strategy for action.** Unproductive fears are usually based in uncertainty. Create a list of action steps to answer the unknowns. ("Look up the symptoms of lung cancer. Find out how many risk factors he has. Make an appointment with the doctor.")
- **Write out a balanced perspective.** While completing the action steps, your mind is unlikely to just "let go" of the worries. For each worry, write down evidence in its support, and evidence against it. For instance, "Dad spent the afternoon in bed today. Then again, just last week he played a full round of golf with his buddies, and no coughing." When the worry reappears, you can respond to it with this alternative, fact-based thought.

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