

For the Caregiver

Cancer affects not only patients but also those who take care of them. These people are called “caregivers.”

One person often will take on the role of main caregiver for a patient. Caregivers are usually a spouse, adult children, or another family member. Sometimes a close friend or a colleague may step in to help, especially when no family is around.



Creation of this material was made possible in part by a pioneering grant from CBCC-USA.

Being a caregiver helps some people cope with the sadness and shock of learning that their loved one has cancer. It lets them show their love and respect, and, of course, it feels good to be helpful and needed.

On the other hand, some people may not feel at ease taking care of a seriously ill person. This could include family members who do not get along well with the patient, people who have too many other things to do, or people who are afraid they would do a bad job. People who choose not to become a caregiver may feel pressure or guilt, even if they have very good reasons for their decision.

If you find yourself thinking of being a caregiver, you need to be honest about your feelings on the matter. Going into this role with mixed feelings can lead to great frustration later on. Make your limits known as soon as you can, before they become a problem. This way, you and the patient can make other plans for his or her care, if needed.

Taking care of yourself

Caring for a loved one with cancer can be very stressful. On top of normal daily tasks, such as cooking meals, cleaning, and other household tasks, caregivers become part of the cancer treatment team. You may find yourself talking to the health care team, giving medicines, and helping to decide whether a treatment is working. This busy schedule may not leave time for you to take care of your own needs.

You may not have thought much about it, but while you are helping your loved one, you must also take care of yourself. This means getting enough sleep and exercise, eating healthy, seeing your doctor when needed, and keeping to normal routines as much as you can. You should not feel guilty or selfish when you take time for yourself. By taking time for yourself, you will have more energy to take care of your loved one.

The following tips can help you take care of your own needs and feelings:

- Don't try to do it all yourself. Reach out to others. Involve them in your life and in the things you must do for your loved one.
- Plan to do things you enjoy. There are 3 types of activities that you need for yourself:
 - Those that involve other people, such as having lunch with a friend or being with other family members for a social function
 - Those that give you a sense of doing something, such as exercising, finishing your household project, or work
 - Those that make you feel good or relaxed, such as cooking, playing with children or grandchildren, watching your regular show on TV, listening to music, or taking a walk
- Make an effort to keep up with what is going on in the “real world” – that is, the world away from cancer. Watch the news. Take time to read the morning paper. Set aside time during the day, like a meal, when you do not talk about your loved one's illness.
- Think about joining a support group for caregivers or using counseling services. A nurse or social worker can make suggestions.
- If you need some time off from work, talk to your boss or the person who oversees benefits at your job. Ask if your company has an Employee Assistance Program, or EAP. These programs can put you in touch with a counselor if you need help dealing with issues like money concerns, stress, and depression.

When others want to help

Despite the demands and stress of caring for someone who has cancer, being a caregiver can be satisfying. Still, at some point there is always just too much for one person to do. Ask for help! This can take off some of the pressure and give you time to take care of yourself. Family and friends often want to help but may not know what you need. Here are some tips when asking them for help:

- Look for places where you need help. Make a list.
- Ask willing family members and friends what jobs they think they can do and when. You could also contact a person with a certain request. Be very clear about what you need.
- As you hear back from each person, make a note on your list to make sure someone is taking care of everything you needed.

The person with cancer

You may find that your loved one is angry, quiet and withdrawn, or just sad. Try to be there for them – offer to listen. If they aren't ready to talk, don't try to force them. They may need quiet time to figure out their own thoughts before they can talk with you. You may get the feeling that they aren't talking to you because they want to spare your feelings. Make sure they know that you are open to talking, even about tough topics.

Still, you and your loved one might want to agree on some limits to what will be expected of you as caregiver and of them as patient. For example:

- Figure out what tasks the patient can safely do. Let your loved one do as much as he or she can.
- Patients should feel free to share thoughts and feelings, but encourage them to talk about things other than cancer and illness.
- Don't try to hide bad news or unpleasant information in an effort to protect your loved one's feelings. This can lead to suspicion and resentment. Let the patient make as many choices as he or she can.

For more information, please visit www.cancer.org.