



## For the Caregiver

Cancer affects not only the person with cancer, but also that person's caregiver and loved ones. The person who takes care of the patient at home is called a "caregiver." The caregiver is often a key part of the patient's care.

Many times one person will be the main caregiver for a patient. This is often the spouse, partner, or an adult child. Sometimes a close friend will step in to help, especially when no family is around.

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.

But some people may not feel good about being a caregiver. There are many reasons for this: family members may not get along well with the patient, they often have too many other things to do, or they may be afraid they would do a bad job. Family members or loved ones who choose not to become caregivers may feel pressure or guilt, even if they have very good reasons for their decisions.

If you find yourself thinking of being a caregiver, you need to be honest about your feelings. 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 their care, if needed.

## Taking care of yourself

Caring for someone with cancer can be very stressful. On top of normal daily tasks, such as preparing meals, cleaning up, and running errands, caregivers become part of the cancer treatment team. You may find yourself talking to the health care team, dealing with the insurance company, 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 well, 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 doing so, you will have the energy you need to take care of your loved one.

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

- 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
  - Those that give you a sense of success, like exercising or finishing a project
  - Those that make you feel good or relaxed, such as watching a funny movie or taking a walk
- Make an effort to keep up with what’s 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 illness.
  - Think about joining a support group for caregivers or seeing a counselor. A nurse or social worker can make suggestions, or call your American Cancer Society at 1-800-227-2345 and ask what services are near you.
  - If you need some time off from work, talk to your boss or the person who oversees benefits at your job. If you can’t or don’t want to stop working, you may be able to take unpaid time off under the Family and Medical Leave Act.
  - 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.
  - Don’t try to do it all yourself. Reach out to others. Involve them in your life and in the things that must be done for the patient.

## 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 will be 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 areas where you need help. Make a list.
- Ask family 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 has taken care of that need.

## Caring for the person with cancer

You may find that your loved one with cancer 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.

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

- Figure out what tasks the patient can safely do alone. Let them do as much as they can.
- Patients should feel free to share thoughts and feelings, but you sometimes may need to 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 they can.

You have an important role to play in helping your loved one through their cancer experience. We have information, resources, and support that can help you. Call us at **1-800-227-2345** to learn more about being a caregiver or if you ever need help for yourself or your loved one.

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For additional assistance please contact your American Cancer Society  
1-800-227-2345 or [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org)