

Seeking counseling support when  
**CAREGIVING**  
is overwhelming

By Melissa Weidman



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When Jane Brody's mother was first diagnosed with cancer, Jane was happy to serve as her caregiver. "Mom took such great care of us growing up," Jane says on the phone to her sister in California. "Now it's our turn to take care of her." Even though Jane knew she would have to handle most of the burden alone, she pledged that she would fulfill their mother's wish to remain at home.

As her mother's health continued to decline, Jane found her own enthusiasm and energy flagging. The constant worry and responsibility, unanswered questions about the future, and lack of sleep and time for herself added up to feeling overwhelmed and depressed. It was all she could do to take care of her mother's needs – her own needs were completely ignored.

Jane is a typical example of the plight many caregivers find themselves in today. According to the Family Caregiver Alliance's National Center on Caregiving, it's estimated that 44 million Americans age 18 and older provide unpaid assistance and support to older people. Research shows that family members who provide care to individuals with chronic or disabling conditions are themselves at risk. Higher levels of stress, anxiety, depression and other mental health effects are common among family members who care for an older relative or friend.

Studies consistently report higher levels of depressive symptoms and mental health problems among caregivers than among their non-caregiving peers. Estimates show that between 40 percent and 70 percent of caregivers have clinically significant symptoms of depression, with approximately one quarter to one half of these caregivers meeting the diagnostic criteria for major depression.

In addition to the mental health risks, caregivers are at far higher risk for physical illness themselves. Many

report not going to their own medical appointments, not taking their own medications, not exercising, and being more likely to smoke and less likely to eat well. The body of evidence shows that caregiver health is quickly becoming a public health issue. Recognizing the signs of caregiver burnout can help alert family members and medical providers to pay attention.

Common signs and symptoms of caregiver burnout include:

- ▶ You have much less energy than you once had.
- ▶ It seems like you catch every cold or flu that's going around.
- ▶ You're constantly exhausted, even after sleeping or taking a break.
- ▶ You neglect your own needs, either because you're too busy or you don't care anymore.
- ▶ Your life revolves around caregiving, but it gives you little satisfaction.
- ▶ You have trouble relaxing, even when help is available.
- ▶ You're increasingly impatient and irritable with the person you're caring for.
- ▶ You feel helpless and hopeless.

Here are some useful tips to help prevent caregiver stress and burnout:

**Ask for help:** Taking on all of the responsibilities of caregiving without regular breaks or assistance is a recipe for burnout. Don't try to do it all alone. Look into respite care. Or enlist friends and family who live near you to pitch in with help running errands, etc.


**Give yourself a break:** As a busy caregiver, leisure time may seem like an impossible luxury. But you owe it to yourself – as well as to the person you're caring for – to carve it into your schedule. Give yourself permission to rest and to do things that you enjoy on a daily basis. You will be a better caregiver for it.

**Practice acceptance:** When faced with the unfairness of a loved one's illness or the burden of caregiving, there's

often a need to make sense of the situation. Try to avoid the emotional trap of feeling sorry for yourself or searching for someone to blame. Focus instead on accepting the situation and looking for ways it can help you grow as a person.

**Take care of your health:** Think of your body like a car. With the right fuel and proper maintenance, it will run reliably and well. Neglect its upkeep and it will start to give you trouble. Don't add to the stress of your caregiving situation with avoidable health woes.

**Join a support group:** A caregiver support group is a great way to share your troubles and find people who are going through the same experiences that you are living each day. Most important, you'll find out that you're not alone.

Jane's sister recognized the signs of burnout in Jane's voice. She flew home and helped Jane set up regular support for getting breaks and taking care of her own medical issues. She committed to coming to help every other month. They agreed to speak on the phone every night after Jane got their mother to bed. Jane felt less isolated and more resilient for coping with the long haul of her mother's disease progression. And once again, Jane was able to feel the satisfaction of fulfilling her mother's wish to be cared for at home. 



**Melissa Weidman** is Director of Community Relations and Outreach for HopeHealth. She can be reached at (508) 957-0200 or [Mweidman@HopeHealthCo.org](mailto:Mweidman@HopeHealthCo.org).