

Self-Care for the Family Caregiver

72 Tips to Help You Survive and Thrive



A gift to you from Corrie Woods
author of
*The Woman's Field Guide to
Exceptional Living*

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A Note from the Author

Dear reader,

We are all, at some time in our lives, either *taken care of* or *giving care to* others. I have written this mini-guide to help our beloved family caregivers to take care of themselves as well as they care for others. It is no small task but perhaps the words that follow will help some to make the shift.

I invite you to share your stories and your feedback with me at

corrie@womansfieldguide.com.

I wish you well!

Corrie

*“There are only four kinds of people in the world – those who **have been** caregivers, those who **are currently** caregivers, those who **will be** caregivers and those who **will need** caregivers.” Rosalyn Carter*



If you are a family caregiver and you learn only one thing from reading this mini-guide, we hope it will be this: *The best thing that you can do for the person in your care, as well as yourself, is to take great care of you.*

The important role that family caregivers play in our society is enormous. Beyond the estimated annual value of more than three billion dollars' worth of care given “freely,” the impact on quality of life for our loved ones and our communities is beyond measure. This “free care” all too often comes with an unexpectedly high price for the caregivers themselves.

The role of family caregiver is very demanding. Often your own needs are ignored as you tend to the needs of others. When your own self-care is neglected, you are statistically more likely to suffer from depression, chronic illness, and *compassion fatigue*: a deep and sometimes painful physical and emotional exhaustion. Your own well-being is then compromised, and ironically you have much less to give to your loved one.

Did you know ...

More than 50 million Americans provide care for a chronically ill, disabled, or aged family member or friend during any given year.

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Informal Care giving: Compassion in Action. Washington, DC: 1998.

Family caregivers who experience extreme stress have been shown to age prematurely. This level of stress can take as much as **10 years from a family caregiver's life**.

Source: Elissa S. Epel, Dept of Psychiatry, University of California, SF, et al, from the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, Dec 7, 2004, Vol. 101, No. 49.

Family caregivers report having chronic health ailments at **more than twice the rate** of non-caregivers.

Source: Health and Human Services, Informal Care giving: Compassion in Action. Washington, DC: 1998.

This guide is designed to help you, the family caregiver, learn to take care of yourself just as carefully as those who are in your care. When you meet your own physical and emotional needs, you will be a healthier and more effective advocate, caretaker, and even role model.

If you are not a caregiver yourself, but are close to one, reading this guide will help you gain greater insights into their challenges so that you can better support them. Also, we hope you will share a copy with the caregivers in your own life.

What is self-care?

At its essence, self-care involves being aware of your own physical and psychological needs, knowing what brings you joy, what helps you feel rested and balanced, and what contributes to your overall sense of well-being and vibrant health. It doesn't stop with just awareness, though. The key that unlocks the door to self-care is taking consistent action that reflects your commitment to your own optimum self-care.

The numerous benefits of self-care include:

- The likelihood of a longer, happier and healthier life
- The capacity to be a better caregiver
- Improved relationships, with both yourself and others
- A strong foundation from which to live a joyful, fulfilling life

What are the signs that you need a serious dose of self-care?

- A feeling of being pulled in too many directions
- Feeling an unrelenting sense of responsibility for everyone around you
- Resenting the person in your care
- Inability to say *No* when you are already stretched too thin
- Isolating yourself from others
- Suffering from mounting depression and sadness
- Experiencing physical changes, including high blood pressure, insomnia, and countless other symptoms
- Finding yourself unable to focus on the task at hand
- Becoming accident-prone
- Not having any idea what your own needs are
- Feeling that any kind of change is exhausting

If you are experiencing even a few of these signs, it is a clear signal that everyone will be better served by you putting your own needs at the top of your “To Do” list each day.

How to get the most out of this booklet:

- Read through it and focus on attending to at least one of your own needs each day
- Keep it handy so you can re-read it often for reminders and inspiration
- Share it with loved ones so they can gain a deeper understanding of your role and how to provide appropriate support and encouragement for you
- Share it with the person for whom you are caring so that they, too, can gain a deeper understanding of your relationship
- Share a copy with other caregivers you know
- Share it with an organization or company with which you are affiliated
- Offer it as a client benefit to caregivers you may serve

Now that the booklet is in the hands of those who need it most, what gentle reminders and practical steps can be taken to begin a journey of better self-care? Read on for 68 tips that you can start using right now to make meaningful, life-altering changes.

Just for You

- Take time off and do so without feeling guilty. Schedule someone to substitute for you to provide yourself with a break.
- Make time and spend time doing things that you love. If you have forgotten what those things are, get out and rediscover them. Further, share your new discoveries and favorite activities with your loved one. Doing so may brighten life for both of you.
- Reward yourself with feel-good treats and savor the anticipation of special planned activities.
- Nurture and maintain a full life outside your role as family caregiver by spending time with friends, participating in organizations, and pursuing creative endeavors.
- Have fun planning and actually taking a vacation.
- Upgrade your care-giving space to foster a bright, positive mood. It will be to your – and your loved one’s – benefit.
- Set aside a half day or even a whole day of quiet. Sit on a park bench, unplug the TV, or take whatever steps help you to peacefully settle your body and spirit.

- Keep a journal to give voice to your feelings. Sometimes the act of writing helps you discover what you are thinking.
- Schedule time to receive loving physical touch from others. How about a foot rub, a massage, or a shoulder rub?
- Keep up your appearance, even if you rarely leave the house. Looking good on the outside can help you to feel good on the inside.
- Use music or guided imagery to help relax and soothe yourself.
- Take time to unwind for a few minutes both before and after your care-giving time.

Communication and Community

- Talk with other caregivers. They know perhaps better than anyone else the impact of the challenges you face.
- Ask for help, knowing that reaching out comes from a place of strength and not weakness. Have a written list on hand of ways that people can help you, such as running errands, car repair, fixing meals, filling out forms, etc.
- Keep a notebook in which you and your loved one can write down any and all questions that come up.
- Delegate to friends, family, and professionals anything and everything that can be delegated.
- Don't isolate yourself from others. Pick up that phone or meet a friend for coffee.
- Listen well to your loved one and find someone to listen well to you.
- Be aware of the non-verbal communication you are conveying to your loved one. Is it supportive and caring, or are you conveying a negative or burdened attitude?
- Know that others may step in to offer help that you simply do not need or that might not actually be helpful. Be open and appreciative, but know how to gracefully receive advice and politely and firmly decline when it does not serve your needs.
- Be an advocate for your loved one, but do not take away their voice.
- Conduct meetings of family or friends to keep lines of communication open. This may help bring family and friends closer together in a time when there is a risk of feeling tension and strain.
- Don't compare yourself with others. Everyone's response to stress is different: learn to recognize when you are approaching your limits.
- Get complete with your loved one. If there are long-standing issues that need to be resolved, do what it takes to address them kindly and gently.
- There are times when you may become an easy target for your loved one's frustration, anger, and pain. That is never easy, but the more balanced and rested you are, the better you will be at handling those occasions.

Your Health

- Do what it takes to ensure you get enough sleep by napping, going to bed early, or resting when your loved one does.
- Eat well. Nourishing your body will help maintain your optimum mental and physical health. Moreover, strive to eat in a slow, thoughtful way rather than grabbing and eating food on the run.
- Skip that extra cup of coffee and replace it with lots of pure water to stay hydrated.
- Attend to your own healthcare needs and stay current on all health check-ups. It is easy to let this slide when you are focused so closely on another's needs. Be reminded that the price you and your loved one pay when you neglect your own health could be huge.
- Discover exercises you enjoy, and start exercising regularly to improve your physical and emotional health.
- Practice yoga for its numerous health benefits including flexibility, muscle strengthening, and stress reduction.
- Practice Meditation to gain clarity and inner calm and to reduce stress.

Emotional Well-being

- Remind yourself regularly that you alone are not responsible for your loved one's health. Notice moments when you feel guilty that you cannot do more or when you experience a type of "survivor's guilt" that your loved one, not you, is the one who is suffering. Talk this out with a support person.
- Watch for signs of depression in yourself, including changes in eating and sleeping habits (too little *or* too much) and be quick to reach out for help.
- Recognize that you may be experiencing lifestyle changes. Be willing to grieve the loss and to adapt to the "new normal" in your life.
- Weave more humor into your life by embracing a playful attitude, reading fun books and watching laugh-out-loud movies.
- Watch for signs that stress may have you by the throat: mood swings, isolation from others, health problems, poor sleep, or digestive upsets.
- Recognize the power and impact of your attitude on your loved one's health and your own, and do all you can to embrace a positive outlook on life.
- Don't be surprised by sudden waves of sadness, and be prepared to take *time for just you* when they come up.
- Know that wearing your care-giving as a "badge of honor" may lead to compromising your own needs for those of others. Place that badge on the shelf.
- Put off making big decisions when your self-care has taken a back seat.
- Watch for signs that your loved one's pain is becoming your own.

Checking in With Yourself

- Go easy on yourself. You do not have to be superwoman or superman.
- Know what pushes you into “overwhelmed” and adopt ways to avoid it.
- Don’t take things personally. It’s not about you.
- Be okay with getting frustrated and angry, but do so with a considerate eye for others.
- Walk your talk. Much of what you are advising your loved one to do may apply to you as well.
- Be clear about what you can and cannot do. Know your limits and don’t stretch yourself past them.
- Identify your personal boundaries. Boundaries with loved ones are among the hardest to recognize and maintain, as history and habit make it easy to push each other’s buttons.
- Watch for the Overachieving Caregiver Syndrome. Signs include neglecting to take time off, refusing to accept help from others, feeling resentful, and constantly sacrificing your own needs to help others.
- Identify what irritates you most in your role as caregiver; communicate with your support team to clear the air and delegate that task.
- Check in with your intuition now and again. When your gut feelings become numb, it may be a sign that your life is out of balance.
- Don’t assume you know how your loved one is feeling, and don’t assume others know how you feel.
- Clearly understand that your loved one did not “do this to you.”
- Be honest about the changes in your life that result from your role as caregiver. Don’t sweep this awareness or the feelings that come with it under the rug.
- Learn to pace yourself.
- Try shifting from being rigid and stiff to being resilient and flexible. There is only so much you can do and so much you can control. The more adaptable you are, the less stress you will experience.
- Don’t lose yourself to the singular role of caregiver. Stay clear about who you are and what you need by checking in with yourself often and by taking time away to get grounded.
- Know that there will be times when your loved one or others may be less than supportive of you. When you take great care of yourself, your ability to weather the ups and down dramatically increases.

Organize

- Get organized and stay organized in your own life and in the life of your loved one. This may mean clearing out clutter in your home, planning menus, or filing papers. Enlist a family member, a friend, or a professional organizer to help you get the job done.
- Keep emergency information close at hand, including the doctor's contact information, medication lists, and the health care history of your loved one.
- Simplify your life in every way possible to reduce stress.
- Plan ahead as much as possible so that you can do things in a well-thought-out and relaxed way. At the same time, be ready for last-minute changes in plans.

Education

- Learn all you can about your loved one's conditions and needs and stay informed along the way. You will then know how to react and what to expect, and you'll be better prepared to make good decisions both daily and in a crisis.
- Become a *self-care expert* by learning all you can about its benefits and practices.
- Attend a wellness retreat to unplug, get a fresh perspective, and enjoy support.
- Take a class to expand your self-care horizons.
- Learn about and build awareness about National Family Caregivers Month, organized by the National Family Caregivers Association and recognized in November

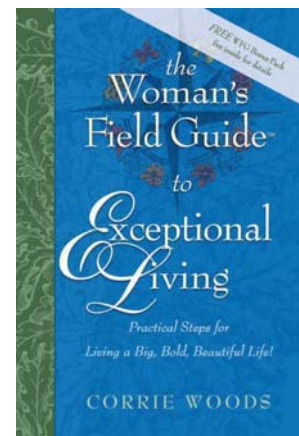
Resources

- The National Family Caregiver Association: www.thefamilycaregiver.org/about_nfca/
- www.familycaregiving101.org
- Family Caregiver Alliance: www.caregiver.org/caregiver/jsp/home.jsp
- www.caregiveing.com
- The Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project: www.compassionfatigue.org/

About the Author



Corrie Woods is an author, an artist, a women's life coach, and a wellness retreat leader. This mini-guide was written from the heart with the hope that it will help to improve the quality of life for our beloved caregivers.



To learn more about Corrie and to purchase her award-winning book, *The Woman's Field Guide to Exceptional Living, Practical Steps for Living a Big, Bold, Beautiful Life!* visit www.womansfieldguide.com.

Additional free mini-guides available at the website include:

- *Oh My Aching ... 101 Tips For Living Your Best Life While Managing Chronic Pain*
- *Self-Care in Your Wisdom Years, A Primer for Women in Mid-Life and Beyond*
- *Gotta Book in You? Tips, Tools and Resources to Coax the Writer in You Out of the Closet*
- *Crafting a Personal Retreat*

and more!