Managing Caregiver Stress

Some health professionals call caregivers “hidden patients.” You need emotional support and practical services just like people with Parkinson’s. With all your responsibilities related to maintaining a home, family and career in addition to caring, stress is an inevitability. Long-term family caregivers often find it challenging to reduce stressors. Here are some techniques to help you manage stress.

Active Stress Reduction

» **Exercise away the anxiety.** Talk to your doctor or physical therapist about setting up an exercise regimen that meets your health needs.

» **Exercise with others.** This simultaneously meets two important needs: exercise and social support.

» **Socialize with people who uplift you.** Nothing can empower you like a feeling of camaraderie. Minimize exposure to negative people. Instead, go out with friends or get involved with a community organization, support group or charity that you believe in.

» **Learn to laugh.** Keeping a sense of humor helps beat anxiety. Watch a funny video or read something funny every day.

Breathing Awareness

» **Create a relaxing space** that will minimize interruptions and distractions.
  - Turn down/off your telephones.
  - Dim the lighting in the room.

» **Sit or lie down with your body supported.**

» **Close your eyes and focus your attention on your breathing.**

» **Inhale through the nose.**
  - Feel abdomen expand first, then ribcage, then chest.
  - Exhale long and slow in reverse order.

» **Keep breath rhythmic;** don’t force or hold breath.

Practice for 5-10 minutes daily. Use this technique whenever you feel stress or loss of control over your body or emotions.
Body Awareness

» As you practice deep breathing, mentally identify areas of your body starting from the head.

» “Listening” to your body’s signals allows you to focus your attention on specific areas of muscle tension. Release the tension; feel your body “sink” into the support beneath you.

» Make sure your position is balanced with equal weight on both sides of the body, stretched out, open and extended. Try lying on your back, arms at sides, legs slightly apart; bend knees if that is more comfortable.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation Technique

This relaxation exercise involves tightening each muscle group in your body, holding for 5 seconds, and then gradually releasing and relaxing for 10-15 seconds. It takes about 20 minutes to perform and can bring tremendous benefits if you fit it into your daily routine.

1. Sit or lie down quietly in a comfortable position, with no distractions or possibilities of interruption. Begin by thinking slow, relaxing thoughts. Bring to mind any comfortable image you can imagine, such as lying by a stream in a beautiful forest. Take three deep breaths and focus on the tension in your body.

2. Go through each of the muscle groups, beginning with the hands, working up to the body then down to the feet. With practice you will soon be familiar with the sequence. Tense the muscles as tightly as you can. Hold for 5 seconds, then gradually release.

3. As you release the muscles, relax and feel the tension drain away. Imagine the blood circulating in the different muscle groups. Concentrate on the feelings in the muscles as they go from tight to loose. Notice the difference between tension and relaxation. Perform the tightening and relaxing of each muscle group twice before moving on.
Recommended Relaxation Recordings

**Script and music:** Nielsen/Miller/Holton: “Healing Blue Sky,” Bernie Siegel, Janalea Hoffman

**Environmental:** “Solitudes” series, Natural Sound Series

**Piano:** David Lanz, Danny Wright, Michael Jones

**Guitar:** Will Ackerman

**Bamboo/Native American Flute:** R. Carlos Nakai, Richard Warner, Christian Nielsen

**Harp:** Kim Robertson, Joel Andrews, Hilary Stagg

**Classical:** Adagio collection, Lind Institute collection

**Religious:** Jon Simon (Jewish), Mary Beth Carlson, Lorie Line, John Michael Talbot (Christian), Benedictine Monks (Gregorian Chant)

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**DID YOU KNOW?**

According to the Parkinson’s Outcomes Project, the largest clinical study of Parkinson’s ever conducted, a change in caregiver can impact the health of both the person with Parkinson’s and the caregiver. Caregiver transition was associated with worsening of clinical outcomes and health-related quality of life. Caregiver strain is a particular consideration for the non-professional family caregiver newly introduced to Parkinson’s care.
Ultimately, finding balance in your mind and body will help you cope with the daily stresses of life. This may mean limiting your exposure to environmental stressors or using complementary therapies. Such approaches are wonderful ways to lower anxiety, lower blood pressure and improve your well-being.

If you feel that you are totally overwhelmed by your feelings, consult with your physician. He or she can refer you to a mental health professional. There is no shame in seeking help when you need it.
CHECKLIST FOR BUILDING GOOD SLEEP HABITS

☐ Establish a regular bedtime and morning awakening time that you maintain seven days per week.

☐ Design and maintain a comforting bedtime ritual.

☐ Turn off the television.

☐ If weaning yourself from bedtime television is difficult, try substituting relaxing music.

☐ Customize your sleep environment; invest in a good mattress and pillow.

☐ Keep noise and light levels low.

☐ Maintain a slightly cool room temperature.

☐ Keep pets from your bed.

☐ Designate your bedroom for sleep and sex; it is not an all-purpose space.

☐ Avoid strenuous exercise, alcohol, nicotine and caffeine within four hours of your bedtime.

☐ Eliminate “checking the clock” throughout the night.

☐ Limit prescription sedatives to a two-week period.

As long as you dress up, with makeup on and your hair done, they think you’re okay. And some days I’m crushed.

– RUTH, CARES FOR HUSBAND, HENRY

For other tip sheets and caregiver support information, order the NPF book Caring and Coping.