

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)

DID YOU KNOW?

According to the *Parkinson's Outcomes Project*, the largest clinical study of Parkinson's ever conducted, a change in caregiver can negatively impact the health of both the person with Parkinson's and the new caregiver. For the person with Parkinson's, the transition is associated with worsening clinical outcomes and health-related quality of life. For the incoming caregiver, particularly family members newly introduced to Parkinson's care, caregiver strain is a serious concern.

.....