

Preventing caregiver burnout: Take time to care for yourself

By Aaron Warnick

Being a family caregiver comes with a lot of responsibilities. But there is one that is often overlooked — taking care of yourself.

A family caregiver is someone who gives physical and emotional care at home to a relative who is sick, has a disability or otherwise is unable to take care of themselves.

Over 40 million people in the U.S. provide family caregiving for an adult or child, according to a 2015 survey from AARP and the National Alliance for Caregiving.

The majority of family caregivers in the U.S. are helping adults, most likely a parent or spouse. Such caregivers are likely to



spend more than 20 hours per week doing so. A lot of the time, that care can involve complicated nursing tasks.

The stress that comes with being a caregiver builds over time. Eventually, it can lead to exhaustion, irritability, hopelessness and anxiety — also known as burnout. When you're burned out, it can be hard to keep up with demands, both in your own life and for those you're caring for.

"The more intensive the caregiving — and the longer you do it — the more you're going to feel stress," says Amy Goyer, AARP's family and caregiving expert. "If you start feeling powerless or lose motivation — feeling like you just don't care — those are major red flags."

While family caregiving is more common at an older age, you can be called on to play the



>> For more information on caregiving support, visit www.caregiver.org

role at any point in your life.

The transition to becoming a family caregiver can be gradual: What begins as providing simple tasks for your parent, spouse or sibling can turn into giving around-the-clock care.

Once you find that you're a caregiver, it's time to take stock of your needs. Goyer has some tips to make sure that you look after yourself while you take care of others.

Find time to step away

Make sure you take time for yourself, even if it's just for a few hours. If you feel like you can never step away, make a list of your neighbors, friends and family who may be able to help. Even if they can only assist for an hour here and there, it can give you a break.

Some communities have senior centers or adult day care centers where you can bring your family member. Adult day programs, which are also available for young adults with disabilities, can include rehabilitation, therapeutic activities, meals and counseling, making them helpful for both you and your family member.

Some caregivers may feel guilty about leaving their caregiving responsibilities to someone else, but Goyer says stepping away is like filling up a car's gas tank. If you let your tank run empty, you're going to be running on fumes.

"You have to look at this in a practical way —

it's not selfish, because if you don't take care of

yourself, you're not going to be as good at being a caregiver," she says.

Look for ways to get sleep

One of the most important things caregivers need is sleep. Studies link caregiving with poor sleeping habits. Some family members may need 24-hour care, which disrupts normal sleep.

About 70% of caregivers for people with dementia report sleep problems, and 60% report sleeping less than seven hours, according to the Family Caregiver Alliance.

Poor sleep is linked to many health issues. It also decreases your ability to cope and increases your risk of burning out.

If you can afford it, have a health aide stay overnight at least occasionally. That way they can do the caregiving and you can find time to catch up on sleep. You need a good night's sleep at least every third night to prevent burnout, the alliance says.

Connect with others, ask for help

Other people can also help take things off of your plate. Finding someone to clean up around the house or take care of the yard can go a long way.

Connecting with other caregivers is also beneficial. In-person meetings and online

groups are available. You can talk with other caregivers who can relate to what you're going through and offer advice.

"It's also a great way to get emotional support," she says.

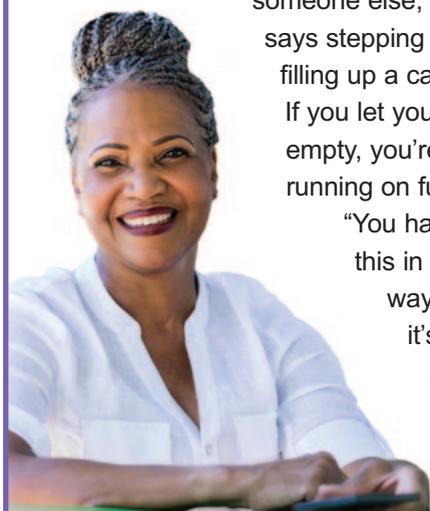
Also, don't try to do everything yourself. It's better to have a caregiving team.

"Seeking and accepting help is key," Goyer says. "How often do people tell you 'Let me know if you need anything' and then you never do? Go back and ask for some specific thing."

If despite all this, caregiving is still wearing you down, don't delay seeking help. Talk to your physician about your problems. Reach out to your community aging office for advice. Seek out professional counseling.

Taking care of a love one is a really tough job, but you should feel good about what you're doing, Goyer says.

"Remember — you may not be perfect, but you're doing your best and you're there for them," Goyer says.



Photos courtesy iStockphoto: Two women, Enigmatic; solo woman, SDI Productions; man and woman, Weedezign; hands, Halfpoint