

Partners in Care

By Lisa M. Petsche

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Reap the Benefits of Autumn Initiatives

September is a great time for taking stock and implementing change. First off, there's the feeling of purpose and productivity that typically accompanies the start of a new school year, ingrained in us from our youth and perhaps also from years of raising children. Second, moderating temperatures typically result in an increase in our energy at this time of the year.

Homework that pays off

As a caregiver, although you may not be returning to school, doing some "homework" in the coming weeks can really pay off in terms of improving your well-being and that of the person you care for. Read on for suggestions.

- If you haven't yet done so, educate yourself about your relative's medical conditions and share the information with him or her and other family members as appropriate, to ensure you have a common and thorough understanding.
- Request a medication review by your relative's primary physician or a geriatrician, to check for drug interactions and determine whether your relative still needs all the medications they are currently taking.
- Arrange for an experienced lawyer to assist your relative in assigning powers of attorney for personal care and property (finances) and preparing a will. Or review such documents if they were done some time ago, to determine if they need updating.

Self-care strategies

It's well known that self-care can improve your effectiveness and longevity as a caregiver. Consider the following strategies.

- Book an appointment with your primary physician if you are overdue for a medical check-up or you're experiencing physical or mental health issues.
- Buy a piece of home fitness equipment, such as a treadmill, or get some workout DVDs so you can exercise without leaving home.
- Do something that provides you with meaning and purpose outside of the caregiving role, such as scrapbooking or researching your family tree. It's important to nurture your identity apart from your role as a caregiver. Revive an old pastime or try something new.
- If it's physically difficult for you to perform outdoor maintenance tasks such as mowing the lawn, tending the garden and raking leaves, or finding time is an issue, enlist the help of a reliable neighbor (consider hiring a teenager from the block) or contract with a reputable yard maintenance service.
- If your relative can safely be left alone but you are anxious about the prospect, supply him or her with a portable phone and get yourself a cell phone so you can stay in touch. An emergency response system may also help put your mind at ease.



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- If your relative can't be left alone, research respite services in your community so you can arrange breaks from caregiving. It's a win-win situation, because your relative will benefit from the added stimulation that comes from a visiting companion or meeting new people and trying new things at a community program. In-home options include respite provided by home healthcare agency staff, an individual hired under a private arrangement (most often located via word of mouth or newspaper classified advertising) and a trained volunteer (for example, from the Alzheimer's Association). There are also adult day care programs and residential care homes that have a short-stay program (so caregivers can plan a vacation). To learn about resources, contact your local office on aging or the non-profit organization associated with your relative's disease.
- Connect with other caregivers. Consider joining a community support group; some offer concurrent care. Information on caregiver groups can be obtained from community social workers and your local office on aging. Online caregiver message boards and chat rooms and electronic mailing lists or discussion forums are some at-home alternatives.
- Join a caregivers' organization – for example, the Caregiver Action Network (formerly the National Family Caregivers Association) at www.caregiveraction.org which offers information and support and advocates for caregivers' needs.