

PARTNERS IN CARE

Enhance your ability to cope with changes and challenges By Lisa M. Petsche

Although it has rewards, caring for a frail or ill older relative can be physically, psychologically and emotionally demanding.

The caregiving journey is particularly challenging when it continues over a long period of time, and when the elder has a progressive disease, complex needs, a demanding personality or mental impairment.

Some caregivers seem to cope better than others with the ups and downs of providing care. The reasons can be varied, but one of them has to do with resilience.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines resilience as "an ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change."

If you are a caregiver, read on to learn about strategies for fostering resilience. They can help you cope with the ongoing stress and periodic crises involved in caring for someone who has a chronic illness.

- Accept the reality of your relative's disease. Denial will prevent you from moving forward and getting your relative the help he or she needs.
- Learn as much as possible about the illness and its management, and educate family and friends to help them understand. Being informed is empowering.
- Hope for the best possible outcome but prepare for the worst case scenario. Unanticipated situations can be the most difficult to handle.
- Pick your battles; don't make a major issue out of every concern.
- Use positive self-talk. Emphasize phrases such as "I can," "I will" and "I choose."



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- Nurture your spirit. Do things that bring inner peace, such as meditating, reading, writing in a journal or listening to music.
- Create a relaxation room or corner in your home — a tranquil spot you can retreat to in order to rejuvenate.
- Develop a calming ritual to help you unwind at the end of the day. Avoid listening to or watching the news before going to bed.
- Look after your health: eat nutritious meals, get adequate rest, exercise and see your primary physician regularly.
- Stay connected to your friends and community groups to which you belong.
- Minimize contact with people who drain your energy or make you feel inadequate — those who are pessimistic, critical or self-focused, for example.
- Simplify your life. Set priorities and don't waste time or energy on unimportant things. If finances permit, hire a housecleaning service or a personal support worker or companion for your relative, to free up some of your time and energy.
- Be flexible about plans and expectations. Recognize that there will be good days and bad days, and therefore how you and your relative feel will fluctuate. Take things one day at a time — give yourself permission to feel all emotions that surface, including resentment and frustration. Remind yourself that you are doing your best and are only human.
- Don't keep feelings and problems to yourself — seek support from a family member, friend or counselor. Join a community caregiver support group (some offer concurrent care), or an Internet group if it's hard to get out.
- Seek help from your primary physician or a counselor if you continually feel sad, angry or overwhelmed. There is no need to suffer, because depression is treatable.
- Accept offers of help. Ask other family members to share the load and be specific about what is needed. Find out about community support services — including respite care options — and take full advantage of them.

Information can be obtained from your local office on aging.

- Don't promise your relative you will never place him or her in a long-term care home. It's important to keep all options open because it's impossible to know what the future holds.
- Do something nice for someone who is going through a difficult time. It takes your mind off your own situation, boosts your self-esteem and strengthens the relationship. It may also help to be reminded that other people face challenges, too.
- Look for ways to include laughter and joy in each day. This will enhance your relationship with your relative, and others with whom you come in contact, and help foster a positive outlook.



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