

Many of us are in a position of caring for others, often navigating the role without a professional skill set per say. The word “carer” encompasses so many meanings; caring for an elderly parent, someone battling addiction or someone experiencing ill mental health, to name but a few.

The role of a carer is often 24/7 and demands a certain level of resilience. To support others well, it is vital to look after yourself. Flight attendants encourage you to put on your own oxygen mask before helping others, and the same applies here.

Five Steps for Consideration

1. Connecting with others

It sometimes seems easier to isolate yourself from friends, especially when you feel tired and sad, but it's important to stay connected to friends who offer you support. Research shows that having a strong social network improves your outlook and overall health. This scientific evidence comes from the fact that oxytocin, a calming and stress prevention hormone, is secreted when we connect with others. Find someone who will listen to you or even provide a dose of humour. Also consider that your own endurance will have limitations, so asking a friend for help in specific and practical ways can be extremely useful.

2. Boundaries

When caring for others, the emphasis of need is placed on the person being cared for. Being mindful of your own needs is, however, still important. Having boundaries doesn't mean you don't care - it is about maintaining good feelings and taking care of yourself too. Setting a boundary starts with you and your own level of self-awareness. Saying “no” might be the hardest thing to do and for some of us it feels like we are being rude. Sometimes we have to learn to say “no”, especially when our plate is full.

3. Emotions

Caregiving is a complex task! The person you are caring for is likely to be experiencing a range of emotions. The role can bring a new closeness with that person, but it can also bring a flood of emotions including compassion, nostalgia, gratitude, devotion, frustration, grief, sadness, love, guilt, and anger. When feelings are left unchecked, it's natural to sometimes experience emotional overwhelm and something known as “compassionate fatigue”, where you are left feeling emotionally exhausted. Don't beat yourself up and feel guilty when moments of anger creep in. Guilt can keep you locked in a chasm of “shoulds” and negative self-talk. Guilt can also play a role in setting your boundaries, especially when it drains your time and energy. To manage your emotions, the first step is to recognise and acknowledge them. Feel them, let them roll over you, and then carry on. Anger, guilt, sadness, fear are all normal reactions.

4. Don't neglect your own health

When you have more on your agenda than normal, it can feel like a juggling act.

- ✓ Getting enough sleep is something to consider, although this is sometimes easier said than done. Start by creating a schedule and stick to the same time to go to sleep and wake up each day. Develop a ritual and routines like having a warm bath, reading and switching off. Avoid stimulants like caffeine and alcohol. Your technology is a stimulant too, so switch your device off at least an hour before going to bed.
- ✓ When you're stressed and busy, eating on the run seems easier, but it means you're not fuelling your body at a time when it needs all the support it can get. Good nutrition offers a powerful step towards increasing energy levels and promoting your mental and emotional health. At times when you “can't be asked”, preparing food in advance can be really helpful as it ensures a steady intake of whole, unprocessed and low sugar content food.

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- ✓ Exercise is potentially the last thing you want to do when you are caring for others and already feeling drained and exhausted. It is, however, one of the best things you can do to elevate your energy levels and regulate your mood. Aim for 30 - 40 minutes of aerobic exercise three times a week. A brisk walk outdoors will offer a great interval to the daily schedule by introducing a healthy change of scenery.
- ✓ Save time to do the things you really enjoy. Neglecting all the things in your life that bring you pleasure will be counter-productive, so treat yourself to guilt-free activities and well-deserved rewards like a massage or manicure.

5. Signs of burnout

When you're caring for others, asking for help for yourself is often delayed or put off. When you are on an emotional and physical rollercoaster, keeping an eye out for signs of burnout is helpful. Common symptoms include feeling unwell more often than usual, emotions running high, over reacting to situations, feeling numb and as if there is nothing to look forward to.

Start with the suggestions above to take care of yourself but if you feel like you need further help, speak to your doctor for sign posting of professional help.

In Summary...

You may already be aware of many of the points I have mentioned, but in times of stress these are points that are often overlooked. Become consciously aware of what you are and are not doing to support yourself is extremely helpful. Creating positive change starts with committing to one action and creating a habit out of it.

What action will you commit to from this list?

Feedback is always welcome. Please get in touch at info@workwisewellness.co.uk

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Leigh advocates that a workplace and community that promotes wellbeing will have a positive impact on everyone's physical, mental and emotional health. To encourage this culture, her approach is a holistic one, although the main area of personal expertise is emotional resilience.

A BSc (Hons) specialising in psychology fuelled her interest in behaviour and the impact it has on performance. She is also qualified as a Mental Health First Aider.



“ My caregiver mantra is to remember:
The only control you have is over the changes you choose to make. ”

Nancy L. Kriseman, *The Mindful Caregiver: Finding Ease in the Caregiving Journey*