



Caring for the Professional Caregiver

In this day and age, we have done an excellent job of burning into our hearts and minds (both figuratively and literally) the fight or flight pattern of living. Yes, you've heard this over and over again, we live too fast. It's true. And when you are a caregiver, this pace doesn't seem to let up, and sometimes is accelerated with seemingly few options to slow down. And when we have families as well as work in the healthcare field, double-duty takes on a whole new meaning.

One of my daughters has Type 1 Diabetes. I am also the parent of kids who have also battled severe anemia, mood issues, serious infections, gut dysbiosis, leaky gut, food allergies, and hypothyroidism. And what is more, I have also delved into the sandwich generation caring for an ailing grandmother who has battled chronic bladder infections, stroke, malnutrition, and severe arthritic pain (which we have gotten under control through nutrition!).

In the early days, I would wake with a wave of fear that my daughter had died in her sleep due to low blood sugar. Yes, it's been an interesting four years. Fear is a constant issue when in a caregiving role, but fear does not need to control you, and neither does exhaustion or burn-out, nor do you have to push through your life feeling trapped in a role you don't remember signing up for. You can actually enjoy your role as caregiver while still living more of what life has to offer you.

The challenges caregivers face day in and day out are vast and many. You may feel fear, insecurity, overwhelm, loneliness, and anger. You may be under-supported, tired, and not know where to seek support. You may neglect your own health, burn out, or fall apart. I have seen this happen.

But this is not to say woe is me, I have to care for everyone else but me, this is to say these are all very natural experiences and part of our growth as parents and caregivers, as human beings, to go through some or all of this. But you don't have to go through it alone, and it doesn't have to be so hard.

In caring for yourself, your family and friends, your clients and patients, you don't have to reinvent the wheel, but you can make the ride as smooth as possible.

What Can Happen if You Don't Take Care of the Caregiver?

Emotional/Mental Effects

- Dissatisfaction with your own life
- Feeling resentment toward those you care for
- Feeling angry, lonely, fearful, mentally and emotionally tired
- Depression and other mood problems
- Burn-out or simply quitting the job of caregiving

Physical Issues

- Gut health issues
- Autoimmunity
- Exhaustion and fatigue
- Infection
- Malnutrition
- Dehydration
- Depression and anxiety
- Toxicity
- Poor exercise habits
- Weight gain
- Weight loss
- Bad skin
- Addictions and dependence on stimulants
- Adrenal fatigue
- Liver problems
- The list goes on...

Oh boy! That is quite a list! And it is by no means exhaustive!

We have learned that caregiving is all about sacrifice, but I dare to differ. If you fall apart mentally and/or physically, who will be there for your loved ones and how will you do your job effectively?

Enter the concept of extreme self-care.

Extreme Self-care

It takes a great deal of attention to let go of what we have been taught about caregiving and relearn to care for yourself, to be able to truly listen to your body and to each other, the cared-for AND the caregiver. So much so that nothing short of extreme care and attention is needed. It is empowering to recognize that all of the seemingly small things you think and habitually do that rev you up, stress you out, and make you unhappy can be unlearned. These things take time, focus, and attention, which may seem extreme to caregivers who are not used to taking even a minute to ground, enjoy, rest, relax, and recover.

Extreme self-care is not only about massages and time on the beach away from home and work, but is also about caring for yourself in your everyday life and work so you don't feel as if you need to escape it. This is one reason I have always resisted the idea of buying a cabin at the lake – I wanted to make *my home* a cabin on the lake where I could feel as if I were practicing extreme self-care at all times – where my children could grow up with that essential value in mind.

Extreme self-care is also about drawing boundaries and knowing when to say no, to let go, and to say *no more*. For example, unhealthy relationships, both personal and professional, can drain the life from you, so it is vital that we are wise enough to recognize when it is time to give more and when it is time to let go. It is important for you to know when to let go and let whatever is happening just be.

And your limits can be set without anger or blame. Boundaries allow you to pull away when it gets to be too much; but to be loving about it. Boundaries are not fences between you, the world, and others but are gentle reminders about what you want and don't want – what you welcome in and what you take a pass on – what is yours and what is not yours.

Selfish, you might think? I beg to differ! Extreme self-care actually helps those around us, as well, since when you are not always available or doing everything for everyone,

the people in your life have the opportunity to enjoy giving, to feel good about making decisions, to feel empowered and needed and valuable and independent. They also learn to care for *themselves* through example and gain a deeper understanding about what it takes to be healthy in every sense of the word. Extreme self-care also allows you to get stronger and to be more present and able to deal with life's ups and downs – and there will be many, as we all know! It isn't your kids' or clients' fault when you feel tired or need some time. So, you need to practice self-care *before* burning out or melting down, *before* you begin to feel dissatisfied or angry with the people who rely on you. When it is your turn to do the caring, you will be rested and centered and better able to be there for the people you love and care for.

I find extreme self-care is in the stopping during a morning walk to identify the tracks in the snow, it is reading in bed with my children, it is in brushing the cats, making meals as a family, taking the time to meditate in the morning, sitting on the hammock, reading those books that beckon me, hanging out in the library surrounded by ideas and inspiration. It is a back scratch, a nap, a little prayer of gratitude before a meal. It is saying no to that job I don't want although I could use the money, it is not having a TV, turning off the lights after dark, a good talk with a friend about what is good in our lives rather than what is not. It is focusing on abundance and possibility and being grateful for all I have learned from illness and challenges and doubt. Extreme self-care is essential for me if I want to care for others because when I am nourished and my cup is full, I have something left to share.

Extreme self-care is not actually extreme. It is the only way to gain the space necessary to turn off the "doer" and the "fixer" and gain perspective about what is really important, to focus on what is right in front of you, now, in the present, so you can truly enjoy your own life (not focus on everyone else's) in a joyful, grateful, meaningful way.

Start Your Practice

Start small, big, it doesn't matter. Just start. There is no guilt involved. Actually, guilt is a useless state of mind that only serves to make us martyrs and victims and is a form of self-sabotage. In time, extreme self-care will become just a part of how you live and take care of yourself and your family. It will become your responsibility, your privilege, your inherent right as a human being.

Learn to LOVE caring for yourself in this way. It is immensely liberating and reinforces the fact that you are in control of your own emotions and life; no one to blame, no excuses to *not* be happy because the power is in your hands.

The power is in *your* hands.

Taking Care of Your Mind and Body

Blessing or Burdon? What is Your Motivation?

Ask yourself these questions and answer them honestly for yourself. This way, you will be able to let some of those feelings be, acknowledge them, and also identify where you may need to make some changes:

How do you see your role as caregiver? Positive? Negative? A duty? A privilege? Never thought about it before?

How do you see the people you care for? Do you see them as a blessing or a burden or both?

Do you *want* to care for them? Or do you feel that you *have* to care for them?

Examine why you are doing what you are doing. Is it because being a caregiver is how you generate feelings of self-worth?

Is it because others expect you to do it?

Is it because there is no one else but you to do it?

Is it because you are the best person for the job?

Is it simply because you are a parent or grandparent and it falls under your job description?

Is it because you are a doer, a fixer, maybe even a little co-dependent?

Is it because you want to but just need help to make it work so you can also be healthy as well as your loved ones, clients, and patients?

If you are going about the business of caregiving day in and day out with no joy in what you are giving or perhaps even harboring resentment for what it may be taking from your life (time, energy, rest), then it is well worth an honest look at your motivation, your limits, your boundaries, and finding creative ways to address any issues that have arisen regarding your care of others and of yourself.

Now that you know your motivation for the caregiving that you do, here are some ways to have a healthy mindset regarding your caregiving role:

Practical Tips

Get some help! You are only one person, so hire out, get some other family members to help, take time off of work, holidays, and use your sick days. At home, get others to do things like the dishes or taking out the garbage so you can focus on what you do best like advocating or scheduling or driving or researching. Respite help is essential. Even though the people that rely on your care are part of your life (and that is wonderful), you also have a life outside of your caregiving, too, and you should be freed up in every way you can to live that life, as well.

Set realistic goals, but be optimistic. Don't be afraid to shoot high, but know that you need to be ok with good enough in family life and at work.

Stay positive. Always try to look at the bright side. I know, easier said than done sometimes, or you may be saying, of course I do! Some folks don't have a problem with what they are doing, and that's great! Perhaps your cup is already overflowing. But when you are starting down that slippery slope to burnout, it is time to retrain your mind. Instead of a burden, see a blessing. Instead of a time-consuming effort, see an opportunity. And always try to see what others do for you.

Avoid martyrdom. Martyrdom is never good. Not for you. Not for the people you care for.

Have the people you care about care for themselves, you, and each other.

If you are starting to see your children as burdens and leave them at home when you are shopping or shoo them away when you are doing things like dishes or preparing meals, for instance, maybe you could have them help. Give them tasks they can perform and have them contribute. Ask for what you need, respectfully delegate, and

encourage them to do the things they are capable of doing for themselves. Although it may take more time, Grandma can feed herself while you do other things, the kids can help with shopping for groceries, and the teen can drive her younger sibling to class. At work, those you are caring for have certain capabilities, as well. Do not encourage learned helplessness. The job of a caregiver is not to do everything for someone but to help them when they need it and not help them when they don't or when they need to get stronger and better at something. Many hands make little work, and although you are still the quarterback, remember that you have a team. And each team member will find purpose in their contribution to your family life and in their own life. They learn self-worth and, above all, empowerment. Just because they need your help doesn't mean that they are incapable. They need to know that, feel that, and live that, and so do you.

Do what you can, and then let go. This goes for everything from healing plans for ill loved ones to everyday health choices like exercising every morning or not eating out. This can refer to the goals you have set for yourself and/or goals you have set for those you care for. Sometimes we have days when our goals are not met, when we were stuck away from home and have to eat out or our planned physiotherapy session was delayed because grandma got sick. For every instance, you have to know that you have done all you can for that day and when it is time to let go of what you cannot control.

Make small changes to make sure you are not ruining your own health.

When caregiving, it is easy to rush through life without dealing with the little details that can compound and create very unhealthy habits and health problems from everything to chronic sore backs to headaches to fatigue. Do little things as a part of how you live and move, and be aware of what you are doing to the contrary. Here are a few examples of ways to do this:

Walk from parking lots to schools, hospitals, or care homes.

Stand and move your body whenever you can when in situations where you would be inclined to sit a lot (in meetings, in hospital rooms, while filling out forms).

Feed yourself while you feed others.

Rest when you can instead of filling every spare moment with tasks and duties.

Try not to multi-task all of the time. It will make you crazy, and you will burn supper and send that email to the wrong person and forget to pick up your child at school all at the

same time. And if you can't avoid multi-tasking, make sure you have breaks and eat right so that your mind is clear.

Do your exercising and centering before you start your day, otherwise you will cut it short or not get to it at all.

Get the right equipment. For example, get a backpack so the weight of the bags you carry doesn't hurt your shoulders. Find a purse that holds a diaper *and* your wallet. Find an ergonomically friendly baby carrier. Use a sling. Always use a cart in the grocery store and not those heavy baskets. Lift clients and patients carefully and with help.

Use technology. Record meetings to share with other family members. Use Facebook or email to mass communicate things like schedules and updates. Use online calendars, alarms in your phones to remind you of appointments, and file-sharing programs like Dropbox.

Get organized! Keep lists and refer to them, categorize things in folders on your computer and/or file box, keep records and notes about things like vitamins and information you have come across that relates to one of your family members, make meals in batches, plan meals if you are a planner, or at least have something in mind. I know this seems like a lot, but it will keep your head on straight and will save you time and stress when you are out the door to the lab for some blood work for one of your kids and can't find the requisition form!

Communicate!...about your experience and limitations and what you are prepared to do; about your findings, opinions, solutions, or problems; about information you may want to receive or have to share. Communication is key when in a family situation and even more so when dealing with staff in places like schools, hospitals, and care homes. Even in restaurants where you are ordering a gluten-free meal! The details about how to do this varies with every place and every person, but it is imperative for you to find out how best to do this in the situations you are in on a daily basis.

Don't take shortcuts. Try to maintain your integrity with the choices you want to make regarding your health like not using plastics or take out containers, eating in fast food restaurants, using chemical-laden cleaners, not adhering to food sensitivities, not recycling, using a microwave, things that take a bit of time and effort but that add up over a very small amount of time. Some days you just won't have time to address it all, but take notice when you are starting to use these shortcuts on a daily basis.

Get sleep. Sleep is where you rest, repair, and recharge. Simply put, without it, you will get sick, become unhappy, and fall apart, both mentally and physically.

Eat right. This is essential. Without the right fuel, your body WILL NOT FUNCTION. You will not be able to think or act or do anything if you do not eat good, whole foods on a regular basis. Avoid skipping meals and loading up on junk food and stimulants as these things will only make your mind mush and your body mushy.

Pay attention... to what the people you care for need and what you need, as well. This takes some slowing down and checking in, but 5 minutes of reflection, of just stopping, will go a very long way.

Practice extreme self-care. This is the most important of all of the above suggestions because it is the one thing that will ensure that you will have success with all of the rest. You can't give to others until your own cup is full because you will have nothing to share or give when you are constantly trying to make something out of nothing or trying to give from a place of lack. You cannot sustain it and probably won't even want to.

These practices must be things that you enjoy and are able to do on a daily basis (some of them on a weekly or monthly basis).

Here are some suggestions: Meditate (even 5 min a day); draw boundaries; practice stress relief techniques like deep breathing and limiting daily events, classes, or appointments; take a day off of everything once per week; go for monthly or weekly massage; nurture yourself with self-massage and even simple things like flossing your teeth; sit in silence or asking that TVs and radios be turned off in your home or car; practice mindfulness; exercise regularly; etc.

And finally, remind yourself why you do what you do every day, be grateful for those precious people you care for, and also be grateful for you. Respect yourself and commend yourself on what you do every day.

Remember that you are no good to others if you are bitter and tired and getting sick, yourself. So, be kind to yourself. Be gentle. And care for the caregiver.