

THE NATURE OF CAREGIVING

Photographs and Words to Inspire Self-Care

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To the dedicated and compassionate caregivers
who give of their time, energy and talents
to care for patients or loved ones
too ill or frail to care for themselves.

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Introduction

The nurses who hovered over me in my hospital bed when I was a very ill twelve-year-old exuded kindness, compassion, and a desire to ease my pain and fears. I left Bethel Deaconess two weeks later pretty certain I wanted to be a nurse. That dream eventually was realized, thanks to the support and encouragement of my family who believed service to others was key to making their Mennonite Christian faith real. Nearly twenty years later, after a fulfilling nursing career in a variety of settings, including hospitals, home health, hospice, and a clinic in the slums of Kingston, Jamaica, my desire to care for others remains, though my focus has now shifted to mental health.

The motivation and inspiration for most professionally trained caregivers, including myself, is to help alleviate the pain of others in some way. Often arising out of a personal experience with suffering, this is their passion and calling. Yet, I would be remiss not to mention that there are countless others providing day-to-day caregiving out of a sense of duty or necessity. In this role, they may find profound significance and meaning, or they may acknowledge that caregiving is primarily an exercise of patience and endurance.

Whether we as caregivers are trained or untrained, paid or unpaid, professional or lay, our role does have an underbelly—that is, a side not often seen by others. Most folks, in fact, see us as living saints!

Nonetheless, there's an underbelly to this work that needs attention! It's the part of us that keeps plugging away, even when the workload is too heavy, the emotional toll from watching someone suffer too great, the sense of isolation too burdensome (particularly for family caregivers), and the lack of time for recreation, recuperation, family and friends too costly. Some days, concerns unrelated to caregiving compound the strain and stress factor even further.

Yes, providing care to others is demanding work. And, if we wish to stay effective and fulfilled for the long haul, we must find ways to minimize the hazard—the drive that keeps us giving and giving while ignoring the warning signs that our life is sorely out of balance. As Ralph Waldo Emerson, famous lecturer and poet, once said, “No person can sincerely try to help another without helping themselves.” In a similar vein, he said, “If you would lift me

up, you must be on higher ground.” In other words, we can’t be at our best as caregivers if we haven’t first provided for our own needs—if we aren’t any healthier than the one we’re caring for. Otherwise, we increase our chances of illness, accidents, relationship difficulties, emotional problems, exhaustion, irritability, and burnout. It’s humanly impossible to properly help and support another without also attending to our own wellbeing.

If you’re saying, “Yes, I agree, but I don’t have the time, motivation, know-how, energy, or resources,” then these pages are for you. The brief self-care tips contained in this book (And I mean brief, because I know you don’t have a lot of time!) are designed to inspire, encourage, educate, and support.

Because I believe in a life of balance and equilibrium, there are chapters encouraging care of the body, mind, emotions, spirit, and relationships. Also, you’ll see chapters that provide specific caregiving strategies. I’ve grouped these topics together in the Topical Index in the back of the book, but as you can see from the Table of Contents, these topics are intermixed so that you’ll get a balanced set of tips if you read the book from beginning to end.



“Self-care is not selfish.
You cannot serve from an empty vessel.” ~ Eleanor Brown

Consider Self-Care a Part-Time Job

It's winter as I write this, and the weather has been downright depressing. Six weeks of little to no sunshine has had a cumulative effect on my spirit. Exercise has been a chore, and I've had little motivation to lose the extra pounds I gained over the holidays.

Into this stupor of self-neglect, I attended a noon seminar on the topic of healthy aging. There, I learned that the same tactics known to reduce the risk of cancer and other diseases—a healthy diet, adequate sleep, regular exercise, spiritual practices, and fostering friendships—are also the keys to healthy aging. What else is new? I thought. But when, near the conclusion of the presentation, the speaker suggested we consider self-care a part-time job, it struck a chord! I'm conscientious and do my best when fulfilling a job, whether or not I'm in the mood. I could look at exercise and the cultivation of other healthy habits the same way!

I realize another job is hardly what you, a hardworking caregiver, want or think you need, but nonetheless, self-care must be given part-time job status! The person receiving your care is dependent upon you staying mentally and physically healthy, and the practices that promote this state of well-being take time! As a reminder to yourself, place a note in a prominent place that reads, "Self-care is my new part-time job!"



“If the only prayer you said in your whole life was ‘thank you,’ that would suffice.” ~ Meister Eckhart

Cultivate Gratitude

Recently I granted an interview to a counseling student to help her fulfill a class assignment. While I was not eager to spend one more hour of a sunny spring day in my office, the beautiful floral bouquet Keisha handed me as she walked in the door, a beaming smile on her face, demonstrated her regard for my time. Feeling appreciated, I gave her my undivided attention. Her gratitude benefited us both.

Noticing, then acknowledging, the things we appreciate in others, in ourselves, and in our day-to-day living is a great antidote to unhappiness and depression! And study after study proves the physical health benefits as well, including an improved ability to fight off infection!

A powerful way to nurture a grateful heart is to write down five big or little joys at the end of each day. Your list might include a hot shower, a lunchtime walk, a meaningful encounter, a compliment received, or your own handling of a difficult situation. To demonstrate your gratefulness to others, particularly those who assist and support you, regularly acknowledge their positive qualities. And don't overlook the person(s) for whom you're giving care; they too need recognition, perhaps for their patience, humor, cooperation, positive attitude, or for what they have taught you.



“What we resist persists.”

~ C.G. Jung

Own Your Feelings

Alena and her fiancé invited her dad, who had stage four cancer, to live with them during his final days. After two weeks, both caregivers were worn thin, not because they begrudged the commitment, but because her father was so demanding and grouchy! Alena started feeling angry and resentful, and, at the same time, guilty for feeling angry.

Intense and conflicting emotions go hand-in-hand with caregiving; they are not right or wrong, good or bad. Our task is simply to acknowledge and accept whatever emotions we experience. Then we're less apt to expend precious energy fighting or denying their existence, often through overeating, overdrinking, overworking, or overspending. What emotions, listed below, have a familiar ring to you? Are there others you can list?

- ~ Anxiety and Fear: The future is unknown for me, and for the one receiving my care.
- ~ Helplessness: No matter how much I do, there is still so much I cannot do!
- ~ Anger: A sense of frustration and helplessness is often at the root of my anger.
- ~ Resentfulness: Time for myself is no more; neither is time with friends and family.
- ~ Guilt: I tell myself I'm not doing enough, or that I've been impatient.
- ~ Sadness: Watching a patient or loved one struggle or decline is tough!
- ~ Grief: Anticipating a death, I face my own mortality, and grieve prior losses.