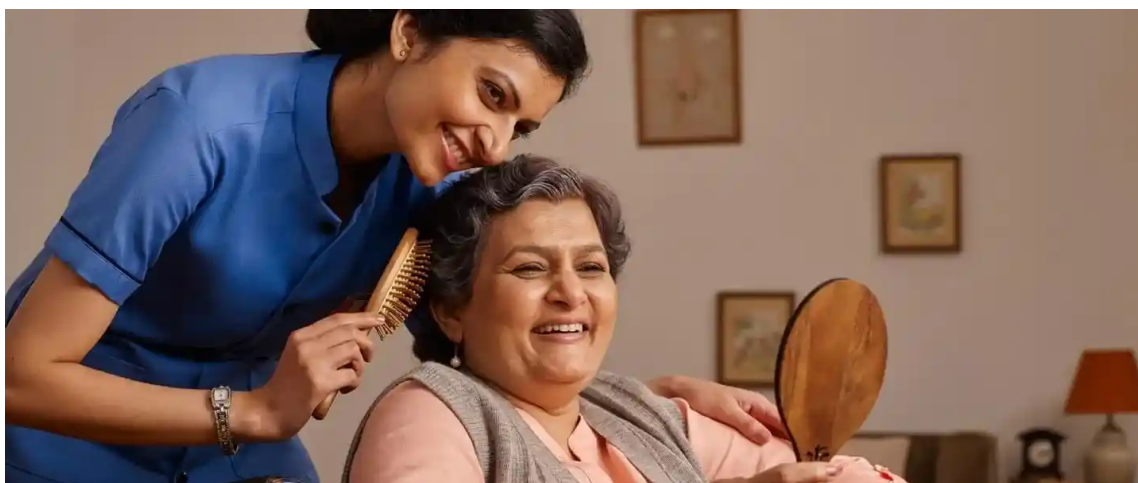


Caring for yourself and others: the ultimate guide to caregiving

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Note: this document has been compiled using research and anecdotes from over 100 sources to deliver the best information possible.



1 Why read this document?

Research shows that simple education programs for caregivers improves quality of life and reduces caregiver burden. By reading this guide, you will be giving yourself an opportunity to seek positive change in your caregiver journey!

2 Understanding Caregiving

What is a caregiver?

It is important to begin by understanding what a caregiver is. A commonly accepted definition by Hopkins Medicine is that "A caregiver is a person who tends to the needs or concerns of a person with short- or long-term limitations due to illness, injury or disability¹."

The role and responsibility of a caregiver

It can be quite difficult to understand what exactly your role as a caregiver actually is. For simplicity, it can be split into 2 parts: Care management (Plan, organise, supervise, coordinate care delivery from medical experts), and Care delivery (Hands-on personal care tasks).

3 The Emotional and Mental Challenges

Caregiving is tough. Whether you're looking after a sick loved one, an elderly parent, or someone with special needs, the job comes with a heavy emotional and mental load. It's a mix of love, responsibility, and exhaustion that can leave caregivers feeling drained, stressed, and even isolated (Huang et al., 2025).

One of the biggest struggles caregivers face is emotional burnout. Watching someone you love struggle with illness or disability can be heartbreaking. Many caregivers report feeling anxious, overwhelmed, and even depressed because they carry so much responsibility (Nasution & Nailus-saadah, 2025). This is especially true for parents of children with autism (Du et al., 2025) or those caring for seriously ill patients (Blütgen et al., 2025). The constant stress of making decisions and providing care can take a serious toll on mental health. In many cases, caregivers experience worse mental health outcomes than the patients themselves. While patients often receive medical attention and emotional support, caregivers are expected to be strong without much help (Chen et al., 2025). This can lead to burnout, feelings of helplessness, and even suicidal thoughts in extreme cases. The longer the caregiving role lasts, the greater the risk of long-term psychological distress. Another big challenge is finding balance. Caregivers often put their own needs last, skipping social events, self-care, and even sleep just to keep up with their duties (Chaudhary & Kumar, 2025). This can lead to burnout, making caregiving even more difficult. Studies show that female caregivers tend to feel more stressed than male caregivers, mostly because of traditional gender roles that expect women to take on more caregiving duties (Chen et al., 2025).

But here's the good news: support systems can make a huge difference. Online communities, therapy, and mindfulness techniques have been proven to help caregivers manage stress and feel

¹<https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/about/community-health/johns-hopkins-bayview/services/called-to-care/what-is-a-caregiver>

less alone (García Del Castillo-López, 2025). Taking breaks, asking for help, and finding ways to care for yourself are all key to staying emotionally strong.

At the end of the day, caregiving is a challenging but deeply meaningful role. The more we recognize and support caregivers, the healthier and happier they—and the people they care for—will be. And using this very mentality, the following section will detail how to combat these mental and emotional challenges.

4 Self-care for caregivers

Why is self care needed?



- Elderly caregivers are at a 63 percent higher risk of mortality than non-caregivers in the same age group, according to a study by University of Pittsburgh
- According to research from the national institutes of health, a caregivers perspective (whether it is viewed as tiresome/lively, etc.) on the stress and strain of caregiving is one of the most important determinants of caregiver mortality.
- Self care for the caregiver is not only important for the caregiver, it is also important for the patient. Research from the NIH (national institutes of health) show that less self care is associated with poorer performance in caregiving tasks.

Clearly, without self-care, both the patient and the caregiver are at risk of harm. And, with a structured self-care routine, research shows significant improvements

The **CARES framework** is a research-backed guide that helps caregivers prioritize their own well-being without compromising patient care. Below is an in-depth step-by-step guide on how to effectively integrate self-care into daily caregiving tasks.

5 Implementing the CARES Framework

5.1 C – Connect with Support

Research confirms that social support reduces stress and improves caregiver resilience. Isolation increases the risk of burnout and depression, so building a support system is essential.

What to do daily:

- **Daily:** Check in with a friend, family member, or online support group. Even a 5-minute conversation can improve emotional well-being.
- **Weekly:** Attend a caregiver support meeting (online or in-person) to share experiences and receive emotional validation.
- **Monthly:** Schedule one mental health check-in with a therapist or counselor to address stress and emotional strain.



5.2 A – Active Health Maintenance

Caregiving often leads to physical exhaustion, irregular sleep, and poor diet, which weaken immunity and increase fatigue. A structured wellness routine is crucial for maintaining energy levels. Also, research continuously shows that physical activity is correlated with higher quality of life for caregivers. There is no understating the importance of exercise **and** a high protein diet for health, especially as you grow older.

What to do daily:

- **Morning (10 mins):** Stretch or do gentle yoga to improve flexibility and circulation.
- **Throughout the day:** Walk at least 5,000 steps while doing errands or caregiving tasks.
- **Meals:** Plan nutrient-rich meals (protein, fiber, healthy fats) to prevent fatigue.

Weekly:

- Exercise for 30 minutes, three times a week (walking, swimming, light cardio).
- Prioritize 7–8 hours of sleep. Set a sleep schedule and avoid screens before bed.



5.3 R – Recharge with Respite

Studies highlight that caregivers who take scheduled breaks prevent burnout and increase their efficiency in caregiving.

What to do daily:

- Take three 10-minute breaks per day (stretch, drink tea, listen to music).
- Practice deep breathing during stressful moments.

Weekly:

- Use a care service (even for a few hours) to step away from caregiving responsibilities.
- Delegate caregiving tasks to family members or professionals whenever possible.



5.4 E – Engage in Relaxation

Chronic stress impacts both caregivers and patients, leading to higher cortisol levels, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion. Research suggests that relaxation techniques can mitigate stress and improve emotional balance.

What to do daily:

- **Morning (5 mins):** Practice mindfulness (focus on breathing, gratitude).
- **Evening (10 mins):** Engage in a relaxing activity: reading, listening to music, or meditating.
- **Throughout the day (30 mins):** Do stuff that you enjoy! It could be a small hobby, like a crossword/sudoku, or it could be playing sports. Regardless of what it is- hobbies (especially physical ones) can have amazing impacts on your health!

Weekly:

- Optional: Attend a yoga or mindfulness class to build emotional resilience.



5.5 S – Sustained & Positive Journaling

Journaling is a proven psychological strategy for managing stress, promoting emotional clarity, and improving caregiver-patient relationships. There are no shortage of methods for journaling; some are more simple (gratitude lists, goals for the day), and some are more complicated (ABCDE method, which will be explained soon). There is no set formula for which one to do, or which one is better. More than choosing the right form of journaling, simply journaling for some amount of time daily is important.

How to Journal Using the ABCDE Method (a modified version to get rid of negative thoughts):

1. **Adversity** What was the stressful event?: "Today was challenging because..."
2. **Belief:** What is your belief about the event? How do you think it has impacted you, do you think you would have changed something about how you acted, etc.
3. **Challenge** negative thoughts: "Was what happened really that bad?" While writing this, remember that research shows that people tend to overestimate how bad most events really are- and so it is likely you are too!
4. **Decide** on a small improvement: "Tomorrow, I will take a 5-minute break when feeling overwhelmed." Or, "Tomorrow, I will not continue these silly, negative thoughts"
5. **Execute and reflect:** End with a positive note: "I am doing my best, and that is enough."

A checklist for your use

A checklist using the CARES framework:

Daily Self-Care Tasks

C – Connect with Support

- ☐ Check in with a friend or family member (5-minute conversation).
- ☐ Join an online or in-person caregiver support group.
- ☐ Spend time talking about your emotions with a trusted person.

A – Active Health Maintenance

- ☐ Stretch or do 10 minutes of gentle yoga.
- ☐ Walk at least 5,000 steps throughout the day.
- ☐ Eat three balanced meals with protein, fiber, and healthy fats.
- ☐ Drink at least 6–8 glasses of water.
- ☐ Get at least 7 hours of sleep at night.

R – Recharge with Respite

- ☐ Take three short breaks (5–10 minutes each).
- ☐ Step outside or sit quietly to reset your mind.
- ☐ Practice deep breathing exercises.

E – Engage in Relaxation

- ☐ Practice mindfulness or gratitude for 5 minutes.
- ☐ Engage in an activity you enjoy (reading, music, art).
- ☐ Avoid overstimulation before bedtime (limit screen time).

S – Sustained & Positive Journaling

- ☐ Write in your journal using the ABCDE method:
 - ☐ **Acknowledge** a stressful event.
 - ☐ **Beliefs** about the event should be analyzed
 - ☐ **Challenge** negative thoughts with positive reflection.
 - ☐ **Decide** on a small improvement for tomorrow.
 - ☐ **Execute** and end with a gratitude statement.

Weekly Self-Care Tasks

- ☐ Attend a support group meeting.
- ☐ Engage in a 30-minute workout or outdoor activity.
- ☐ Plan a relaxation session (yoga, spa, nature walk).
- ☐ Prepare nutritious meals for the upcoming week.
- ☐ Spend time on a hobby or creative outlet.

Monthly Self-Care Tasks

- ☐ Schedule a mental health check-in (therapy or counseling).
- ☐ Plan a day off or use respite care services.
- ☐ Organize caregiving responsibilities to avoid burnout.
- ☐ Reflect on self-care progress and adjust routines if needed.

6 Resources and Additional Support

For the CARES framework, let's look at resources and additional support that could help in each domain.

C – Connect with Support

Caregivers often experience isolation, which can lead to emotional distress. It is essential to build a strong ****support network**** to reduce stress and improve overall well-being. Here are some valuable resources:

- **Online Support Groups:**

- **AgingCare** – A forum where caregivers can share experiences, ask questions, and get peer support. I highly recommend using this resource- it is comforting to know that there are others with similar problems and see different perspectives.
- **The Caregiver Space** – A dedicated online platform providing articles, support groups, and interactive discussions.

- **Therapy Apps for Emotional Support:**

- **BetterHelp** – Provides affordable online therapy with licensed professionals.
- **Talkspace** – A convenient therapy app offering counseling via text and video.
- **Amaha**: An established organization that provides therapy depending on your needs.

A – Active Health Maintenance

Maintaining good physical health is crucial for caregivers. Regular exercise, a healthy diet, and proper sleep can help improve energy levels and reduce stress.

- **Fitness Apps for Quick Workouts:**

- **Darebee** – Short, effective and **free** exercises that fit into a busy caregiving schedule.
- **Yoga with Adriene** – A yoga website that provides simple, easy to follow yoga tutorials.

- **Healthy Meal Planning Tools:**

- **MyFitnessPal** – Helps caregivers track meals, hydration, and caloric intake.
- **EatRight** – Provides expert dietary advice and meal plans for balanced nutrition.

R – Recharge with Respite

Taking breaks is essential to prevent burnout. The following resources help caregivers find temporary relief and delegate tasks.

E – Engage in Relaxation

Relaxation techniques can help caregivers manage stress and maintain emotional balance. These resources offer guided mindfulness exercises, creative outlets, and relaxation tools.

- **Mindfulness and Meditation Apps:**

- **Headspace** – Provides meditation exercises for stress reduction.
- **Insight Timer** – A free platform with thousands of guided meditations.

- **Creative Outlets for Stress Relief:**

- **Colorfy** – A digital coloring app that promotes relaxation.
- **Duolingo** – Learning a new language can serve as a mental escape from daily stress.

- **Music and Sounds for Relaxation:**

- **Spotify** – Offers pre-made relaxation and focus playlists.
- **Rainy Mood** – Provides calming nature sounds for relaxation.

S – Sustained & Positive Journaling

Journaling is an excellent way for caregivers to process emotions, track progress, and manage stress. Various methods can be used, including gratitude journaling, stream-of-consciousness writing, and structured journaling techniques.

- **Guided Journaling Apps:**

- **Day One** – A digital journaling app with structured templates.

- **Reflectly** – An AI-powered journaling app for mental health.
- **Journaling Methods for Caregivers:**
 - **Gratitude Journaling:** Write down three positive experiences from the day.
 - **Stream-of-Consciousness Writing:** Free-write for 5–10 minutes to release emotions.
 - **The ABCDE Method:**
 - * **A**cknowledge a challenge.
 - * **B**elief about the challenge
 - * **C**hallenge negative thoughts.
 - * **D**ecide on a positive step.
 - * **E**xecute and reflect.