



## Caregiver's Questions and Answers

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### **Question:**

I've read that humor can help caregivers. I've tried to find something funny about my mother dying of colon cancer, but I can't. She is a fighter and very courageous in her battle. I've lost my sense of humor and I'm fearful I'll never get it back. Is it possible for me to find my smile again? Are there circumstances where humor just isn't appropriate?

### **Answer:**

Certainly, everyone has boundaries as to where and when humor is appropriate. It isn't necessary to find humor in your situation. But if you want to find that smile again, you will need to rethink how you use humor in your caregiving role. The idea behind using humor in caregiving is not to laugh *at*, but to laugh

*with*. Studies show that humor is a healing powerhouse not only for the caregiver but also for those receiving care. A well-placed comment followed by a hearty belly laugh can lift your mother's spirits as well. We know for a fact that the physical act of laughing decreases stress and that humor can, and does, absorb some of the trauma that leads to caregiver's compassion fatigue. This is one way to lighten your heavy load and keep you balanced and energized. For now, if you can't find your smile, let others find it for you. Reconnect with things that brought a smile to your face prior to your mother's illness. Maybe it was the witty writing of Dave Barry, or watching Seinfeld re-runs on television, or sharing a cup of coffee with a friend who says things that tickle your funny bone. Whatever it is for you, carve out time each day to revisit that place where humor resides. Laughter reminds us that life is good at times when it is so easy to forget. Your smile will return - you can count on it.

**Question:**

I am a social worker in the field of child advocacy and I experience heart-wrenching situations daily. I fear I have become addicted to technology. My cell phone, pager, and laptop are always close by. At home, I find it impossible to "disconnect." What if someone needs me and I'm not available? My head says I need to separate my home life from my work life, but my heart tells me the opposite. How do I deal with this dilemma?

**Answer:**

Your head wins on this one. While technology has improved our lives by leaps and bounds, it also wreaks havoc on our boundaries. We are reachable 24/7 and as caregivers we thrive on making ourselves available to others. As a result, we aren't available to ourselves, and in many cases, available to our partners and children. I see this challenge played out in all

caregiving professions. As with any addiction – and making ourselves available via technology 24/7 can be a form of addiction – start by doing one thing to move yourself in the right direction. It will be impossible to disconnect completely, so try checking emails only 3 times a day – 9 am, noon and 6 pm. After the last login, logout and turn your attention to your loved ones. Another way to decompress from technology is to partner with a colleague to cover each other's calls. On the days and nights where you aren't "on call," turn off the pager and spend your time reading a good book or going to the gym. The idea is to take the addictive behavior that is not serving you well and replace it with a behavior that leads to authentic, sustainable self-care. You must find what works best for you. In time, you and technology will make peace, leading to a more balanced and sane life.

**Question:**

My mother died three years ago leaving my father devastated. He has reverted to behaving more like a child than an adult. My brother and I now serve as his caregivers – preparing his food, reminding him to bathe or get a haircut, and doing his laundry. We are fearful about leaving him alone. We try to keep him busy and active, but he isn't responding. In fact, he seems to be spiraling downward. He's only 63 and in good health. Help!

**Answer:**

Help is on the way. Please don't take offense, but you are enabling your father to remain powerless and childlike. Without a doubt, he is in emotional pain. The loss of your mother has devastated his life and he has crawled into a shell. Your first step is to accompany him to his physician's office to be sure he isn't suffering from disabling depression. His physician will know immediately if he requires medication or professional help. If this isn't the case, you can best help your father by weaning him off his support system: you and your brother. He probably senses

your fear about leaving him alone and this makes it easier for him to hold on. Work with him to take on one task at a time. Ask him in a light-hearted, positive way if he would prefer to learn to cook or do the laundry first. Let him lead the way. Perhaps you can start in the kitchen. If your mother was the chief cook and bottle washer, your father may be kitchen phobic. He may be frightened at the prospect of actually preparing a meal. If this is the case, take him on a guided tour through the kitchen. Start with something simple such as making a pot of coffee and a piece of toast. As primary as this may sound, he can build up his confidence by doing the little things first. Once he becomes more acquainted with planning his menus, shopping at the grocery store and finally preparing a nutritious meal, he will be ready to move on to the next step – laundry. This process will take time. Don't lose patience. By today's standards, he is still a young man. He can, and will, develop a new lifestyle. He will always miss your mother, but if you can help him find his own feet again, he won't miss out on a happy, healthy future.

**Question:**

I don't care about my job, my family, friends or hobbies anymore. Eating, sleeping and bathing have become unbearable tasks. In my job at an animal shelter, I snap at my colleagues. I've stopped babysitting for my nieces and nephews every weekend. And I don't shop for food and clean the house for my mother anymore. I've always valued my role as a caregiver, but now I just want to be left alone. What is happening to me?

**Answer:**

Could it be that you have taken care of everyone else but yourself? Your life as you describe it resembles the list of symptoms known as compassion fatigue. This secondary traumatic stress syndrome strikes caregivers who do not practice authentic, sustainable self-care on a daily basis. Symptoms

include isolation, emotional outbursts, lack of interest in self-care practices, sadness and apathy. Compassion fatigue sufferers are “other-directed,” which means they take care of everyone else before taking care of themselves. This practice usually originates in childhood where a person takes on the role of family caregiver. If this sounds all too familiar to you, don’t lose heart. Jumpstart the healing process today and it will carry you back to wellness. Begin by focusing only on yourself and apply the basics to your life: good nutrition, exercise, and restful sleep. Explain to your family members that you need some time to reclaim your spirit and your sanity. In time, if you find you haven’t regained a positive outlook on life, consider professional help. You may need some assistance as you navigate your healing path.

*Patricia Smith is a certified Compassion Fatigue Specialist with 20 years of training experience. As founder of the Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project© ([www.compassionfatigue.org](http://www.compassionfatigue.org)), the outreach division of Healthy Caregiving, LLC, she writes, speaks and facilitates workshops nationwide in service of those who care for others. She has authored several books including *To Weep for a Stranger: Compassion Fatigue in Caregiving*, which is available at [www.healthycaregiving.com](http://www.healthycaregiving.com) or [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com).*