

Go Ahead...

Give Yourself a Break

Rejuvenate in ways that feel good

by Paula Spencer Scott

Laura Patyk hated to leave her mother's bedside when she had end-stage congestive heart failure, just as two years earlier, she'd hesitated to leave her father-in-law, who had kidney cancer.

Both elders were in the good hands of hospice programs in greater Charlotte, North Carolina. But it always felt selfish to her to take a break.

"And sure enough, I kept getting sick and developed insomnia," says Patyk, who also cares for

six school-age children. "I learned the hard way to take better care of myself, no matter what."

Burnout is a real risk for family members caring for a loved one. Professionals call it "compassion fatigue"—caring so much that you give yourself too little. It's a byproduct of the stress and fatigue that can hamper caregivers, says Patricia Smith, a certified compassion fatigue specialist and founder of the Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project.

"Stress is all about 'too much'—too much work, too much activity, too much stimulus. Burnout is 'too little'—too little time, too little interest, too little energy," she says.

Whatever you call this distressing syndrome, here's a healthier approach:

- **Be aware that this is a very real issue.** "The premise of healthy caregiving is this: Fill up, empty out. Fill up, empty out," says Smith. "Caregivers who are at risk for compassion fatigue empty out, empty out, empty out. They never learned to fill up so they have something to give."

Warning signs of burnout include isolation, bottled-up emotions, persistent sadness and apathy, lack of interest in self-care, and persistent ailments such as colds or gastrointestinal upset.

- **Don't think that "nobody can do this but me."** It's true that you know your loved one better than anyone, and you provide a wonderful level of care as a result. But others—family, friends, community resources such as nursing aides and elder companions, or hospice and palliative care teams—can also provide competent, even excellent, care. And their doing so frees you up to refresh and recharge.
- **Figure out what "fills you up."** Give thought to what replenishes you. Walking? Reading? Knitting? Spending time with friends? Being out in nature? Plenty of restorative activities don't cost anything and are always available to you.

- **Recharge in ways that feel authentic to you.** If your best friend wants to drag you shopping but you find it draining, you won't feel refreshed. Find what works for you, not anyone else. "The art of 'filling up' is finding what brings you peace, well-being, and a sense of belonging," Smith says.

- **Take a break from technology.** There are other sources of stress in our lives that can contribute to burnout. "Because we all love our smartphones and pagers, we are 'on call' 24/7," Smith says. "Set boundaries. Check your email at 9 a.m., noon, and 6 p.m. only. Limit how much time you spend on your cell phone. Take a

complete break from technology on weekends."

- **Don't be hamstrung by fears of what you'll miss.** Patyk, the Charlotte caregiver-mom, is now caring for her widowed live-in father, who has cardiac issues. But this time around, she listens to her instincts when she needs a break. She goes bike riding around her neighborhood and lunches regularly with friends. She even recently got away to the beach overnight.

"There's always a little calm, even in a storm," she says. "Even if something happened in my absence, I have no regrets because I know I'm doing and saying everything I need to." ❖

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What a Caregiver Needs to Hear

Many caregivers neglect their own needs because they worry what others, including their loved one, will think if they take time away from caregiving.

That's why it's so useful for caregivers to hear encouraging messages of support from patients and the rest of the family.

- **"You're not selfish."** It may be true that we exist to serve others, but our own bodies also need our attention, to be fed and exercised and replenished. It's not selfishness to divert a little attention from a sick loved one to your own needs; it's being your human self.
- **"You're not uncaring."** Even in the midst of a crisis, the rest of life goes on. Tending to your own needs momentarily isn't a reflection on the level of love and care you feel for another.
- **"You're doing us both a favor."** The stronger and more fortified you feel, the better able you are to provide compassionate and meaningful care. If you're frazzled and dragging, you won't function well. And that in turn can endanger the comfort and safety of your loved one, which is, after all, your ultimate goal.