



## **Caregiver's Questions and Answers**

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### **Question:**

I keep hearing that caregivers need to create "personal boundaries." I haven't a clue what that phrase means. Can you help me to understand?

### **Answer:**

Creating personal boundaries means determining our limits - what we will and will not allow in our lives. When this term refers to caregiving, it takes on special meaning. To be effective, compassionate caregivers we must learn to conserve our resources and energy. In doing so, we protect ourselves from feelings of resentment, anger and fatigue. The best way to determine your personal boundaries is to assess your needs. How much alone time do you require daily to renew and refresh

yourself? How much support do you need to complete the necessary caregiving tasks? If someone in your care tends to be abusive, where do you draw the line? Once you have a clear view of your boundaries, you can create a plan that allows you to care for another with gentleness and patience.

**Question:**

I am the primary caregiver for my 89-year-old mother who is suffering the late stages of Alzheimer's. My husband and teenage children have been supportive and helpful. I have two sisters who live in the area as well, but do nothing to help except offer advice. While we were once very close, I now feel only resentment for both of them. Am I being unfair?

**Answer:**

Perhaps. There is a chance you are bringing your childhood patterns into your current relationships with your sisters. Were you designated as the family caregiver? Did your parents rely on you to be the responsible, helpful daughter? Did you ever ask for help from your sisters? Chances are good you were cast in the role of caregiver at a young age and have never reestablished your identity within the family unit. If this is true, you and your sisters are still playing out those roles. Contact your sisters and tell them face-to-face, openly and honestly, what you are feeling. But that is not enough. You must also ask them kindly and respectfully for their help. By working to create a support system for your mother everyone will win. Your sisters will spend quality time with your mother, and your mother will reap the benefits of compassionate caregiving. When that happens, you will be able to relax knowing your mother's care rests in many good hands.

**Question:**

My husband of 57 years suffers from congestive heart failure. He is unable to do much more than get through the day. I am in excellent health and crave exercising, socializing and enjoying hobbies such as gardening. I have caregiving support, but when I do get out I feel terribly guilty about leaving my husband behind. Is this normal?

**Answer:**

Yes. Family caregivers often fail to recognize the great loss associated with a loved one's chronic or terminal illness. Your husband is no longer able to share the life you once had, and to further complicate emotions, you are coming to terms with the fact that the future isn't going to be what the two of you had planned. Guilt is a normal part of grief. In time, you can lessen your feelings of guilt by forgiving yourself. As caregivers, we are called to walk alongside of those in our care to offer love, support and a listening ear. We are not called to carry their pain and suffering. Understanding that distinction will help you to remember the best thing you can do for your husband is to stay healthy and active. Your self-care practices will sustain you through his illness and carry you far into your future.

**Question:**

My wife has multiple sclerosis and is in a wheelchair. We have no children and I still work full time as a college English professor. Her condition has worsened in the last year to the point where she can't be left alone. To be honest, I don't where to turn. We have many friends and acquaintances who have been supportive, but it is time to bring in a professional caregiver. I usually have all the answers for my students, but in this situation, I don't know where to begin. Can you offer me a first step?

**Answer:**

The good news is that there is help available. First and foremost, ask family, friends and colleagues for recommendations. In addition, go online and begin by searching the following two websites: American Red Cross at [www.redcross.org](http://www.redcross.org) and the National Family Caregivers Association at [www.nfcares.org](http://www.nfcares.org). Both worthwhile organizations have developed extraordinary networks and can lead you to further resources. Closer to home, stop by your local or campus library and check in with the reference librarian. These professionals are a warehouse of knowledge and can help you determine senior service organizations in your community. Congratulations on your healthy outlook and ability to deal with your present situation in a calm, caring manner. This will lead you to help that is tailored to your lifestyle and, most important, to your wife's needs.

*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).*