

## 10 things hospice workers know about staying healthy and whole as a caregiver

In the month of love, we're aware there are thousands of you showing the greatest kind of love every day by giving your time and care to someone who is disabled, sick, elderly, or even dying. In our hospice services we support patients' families and caregivers, as well as the patients themselves. Here are ten things we've learned to help you minimize caregiver fatigue and continue offering the best of yourself to your loved one.

1. **Get appropriate help on board.** Family, friends and even professionals can provide important support. Talk with your doctor, counselor, school district, senior center, council on aging, or other professionals to figure out what kinds of help you need and are eligible for through your medical plan. Professionals in personal care, home health, private duty nursing, hospice, disability services, and respite programs can be integral to your team. Sometimes well-connected people can help you find solutions even when you think there are none.
2. **Take breaks.** Stepping away, even for just a few minutes, can help you process and relax. You may be able to take a few days away from caregiving while your loved one is well cared for in a respite program. Many communities have adult day centers that can be a wonderful resource for caregivers, on a regular basis or even just occasionally. Volunteers in some programs (especially hospice) can offer an hour or two to allow you to take a walk, attend a class or group, or wander the aisles of your favorite store. Even a few moments to step outside for a breath of fresh air and peace can make a great difference to your mood and mindset—give yourself that gift whenever you can.
3. **Find gratitude.** Finding things to be thankful for every day helps keep us more positive. Gratitude is a choice to focus on the good in life. Large or small, the things you are grateful for start to look bigger when you observe them on purpose. Many people like to jot down grateful thoughts in a journal or planner. That gives you a resource to look back on if you have a day when gratitude is harder to find. You can be grateful for a day that went well, or grateful that you somehow found the strength to survive a really difficult one.
4. **Exercise.** You don't have to run a marathon; just a consistent ten minutes of walking each day can greatly reduce symptoms of depression. Yoga can help balance not only your body, but your mind and spirit as well. It can also be a good social activity. Many forms of exercise help us engage our brains and process thoughts and feelings more completely. The most important thing is to find the mode of exercise you enjoy enough that you'll do it consistently!
5. **Calm your mind or meditate.** Being mindful of the moment helps provide clarity. Mindful meditation can be difficult if we're not used to it. Our brains often rebel against silence and try to create noise to fill the space. This is normal, so don't blame yourself if you find it difficult to clear your mind. Just notice your thoughts, and then watch them go by like leaves floating on a stream. You can also find dozens of guided meditations on the Internet to help you focus your practice.



6. **Have realistic expectations.** Attainable goals provide us with important small victories. For example, don't try and clean the whole house; pick a room and accept that. Recognize that your time of grief might not be the time to care for everyone else—choose your priorities carefully. If you feel it's best to set a big project on the back burner, that's all right. Ordering in a holiday dinner or letting a few dandelions dot the front lawn is just fine. Good enough is good enough.
7. **Be patient with yourself.** You are probably doing better than you know. We all face challenges in life, and as a caregiver you might find those challenges considerably harder. Allow yourself to back off what you might normally expect from yourself. It's ok to be less productive. It's even ok to fail. It's ok to spend some time crying or to have a bad day. None of those things indicate that you cannot get back up and do positive things with the hours, days, months and years ahead. You absolutely can.
8. **Treat yourself a little.** You deserve it, and it will give you a moment of pleasure. Something that brings you joy and comfort goes a long way toward keeping you healthy and safe. Put your favorite sheets on the bed. Light a candle and take a relaxing bath, or pick up an inexpensive bouquet next time you're at the grocery store. A massage is always a good bet. Treating yourself can also be giving yourself time to read, think, pray, or meditate—a treat doesn't have to cost money.
9. **Eat, sleep and care for your body.** Your body is an important part of the body-mind-spirit relationship. Get plenty of sleep and eat healthy foods to keep your engine running smoothly. Take the time to care for your skin, hair, and nails—by yourself or with a professional. See your doctor and dentist for regular checkups and anytime you have a problem that needs their assistance. Caregiving can be some of the most demanding work there is, and for your loved one's benefit as well as your own, you need to stay physically well and healthy.
10. **Feel your feelings.** They are a normal part of the human condition and need to be processed. Self-care is important, but it is a lot more effective if we are compassionate to ourselves. Being self-compassionate means accepting your feelings without judging yourself. Be as kind to yourself as you'd ideally be to someone else you love. Expressing your feelings matters, too. Sometimes our feelings come out in problematic ways, but if we can find good outlets, we get the relief we need in positive, helpful ways. You can write in a journal, talk with a counselor or trustworthy friend, or try a creative medium like art or music.

If you are a caregiver in Butte, Choteau, or Great Falls, Montana, we would be honored to help you explore programs that could support you—even if they're not ours. Please call our Clinical Services group at one of the numbers below:

Butte: 406-533-0020

Choteau: 406-466-2088

Great Falls: 406-761-3680