

Taking care of someone can be very rewarding. It can also be challenging. If the stress of being a caregiver is wearing you down, and you need support, you are not alone. In fact, caregivers in one study reported lower ratings of overall health and higher levels of stress.

Read on for suggestions on how to cope with the stress and stay healthy.

To be effective you have to stay healthy, reduce stress, and take care of your own needs. This is the only way you'll be able to help keep the person you care for moving in the right direction.

Coping with caring for someone

Having a mood disorder such as bipolar disorder or schizophrenia can be stressful. And it's stressful for you too. Don't be afraid to ask for help. There are limits to what you can do. It's okay to feel overwhelmed. When you do, it's okay to ask for help. For help, look to family and friends or to caregiver support and advocacy groups.

Build a support team. Don't try to do it all alone. There are times you will need help from others. Plan ahead by figuring out whom you can ask. When you can't be there for the person you are caring for, you need to be able to turn to others, such as family members or friends. You may also be able to hire professional care workers for limited periods of time. Make a detailed list of everyone who is willing to help. Include their contact information and availability. Put together this list now, so you will be prepared in advance for the day you need help.

Be organized. Make a detailed schedule that includes other people (friends, family) and gives them certain responsibilities. Discuss the various chores that must be done with the group. Agree on who should do what and when. This will help everyone stay organized. It will also help you head off conflicts in advance and plan ahead for coverage during times people are away. This is an effective way to help manage the extra demands on your time.

Staying healthy

Caring for someone with a mood disorder can take a real toll on your emotional and physical health. But your own health should come first. It may sound selfish. But it's not. To take care of someone else's needs, you have to be healthy. Here are some things to keep in mind:

Take time to relax. Relaxation exercises such as deep breathing or meditating can be helpful to reduce stress.

Take mini-vacations. For just a few minutes or a few hours each week, stop thinking about providing care. Think about what is going on in your own life.

Make time for yourself. Taking time once in a while to have fun may seem selfish. But it's an important way to keep your mind and body healthy. The person you care for needs you to be at your best. The only way to do that is to recharge your batteries now and then.

Eat a well-balanced diet. The person you're caring for has most likely been instructed to eat well. Eat along with them to maintain a healthy diet.

Get lots of rest. Always aim for 8 hours. If your duties require you to get up during the night, try to make time to take naps during the day.

Taking care of yourself (continued)

Get regular exercise. Regular exercise will give you more energy, reduce your stress, and elevate your mood. You should try to get 30-60 minutes of exercise at least four times a week. But even a walk around the block can be effective.

See your own doctor. Getting regular medical check-ups is always important. But since you are caring for someone else, you probably have more stress in your life than you otherwise would and you may also be more physically run-down. And visiting your doctor sets a good example for the person you're caring for.