



TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF

A Guide for Caregivers of Service Members and Veterans

Traumatic Brain Injury Center of Excellence

WHAT IS CAREGIVER BURNOUT?

You may find that you spend all your time caring for your loved one, resulting in your own needs being placed on hold. Although your reaction is normal, there can be harmful effects if you focus all your attention on them.

Caregiver burnout is a state of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion. It may be accompanied by a change in attitude from positive and caring to negative and unconcerned. Burnout can occur when caregivers don't receive the help they need, or try to do more than they are able to. Caregivers who are "burned out" may experience fatigue, stress, anxiety, and depression.

WHAT IS COMPASSION FATIGUE?

When a person is caring for someone else for long periods of time, they can become drained of compassion or empathy. When this occurs, they are at risk for compassion fatigue, or feelings of indifference, pessimism and disinterest in the care of their loved one. They may continue to perform their duties, but can carry feelings of resentment, guilt and hopelessness. They may also display uncharacteristic behaviors such as aggression or neglecting their family member.

WHAT ARE SOME EARLY WARNING SIGNS OF CAREGIVER BURNOUT AND COMPASSION FATIGUE?

Physical

- Changes in appetite or sleep habits
- Constantly feeling tired and drained
- Frequent headaches and stomach or muscle pain
- Lowered immunity, increased illness
- Reduced efficiency and energy

Emotional

- Feeling down, depleted, depressed or detached
- Emotional hypersensitivity
- Increased irritability, anger or anxiety
- Increased cynicism and negative outlook
- Sense of failure and self-doubt

Behavioral

- Social isolation
- Procrastination
- Strained relationships
- Projection of frustration onto others
- Use of food, drugs or alcohol to cope
- Withdrawal from responsibilities

Occupational

- Decreased motivation or feelings of control over work
- Decreased recognition of work achievements
- Increased errors and absenteeism
- Loss of work-life balance

WHAT CAN I DO IF I AM EXPERIENCING CAREGIVER BURNOUT OR COMPASSION FATIGUE?

If stress, sadness or anxiety begin to feel out of control, seek help by confiding in a friend, participating in a support group, or by consulting with a pastoral counselor or mental health provider. You can also consider respite care options to allow time for you to rest and recover.

WHAT IS SELF-CARE?

Self-care is anything you deliberately do to take care of your physical, psychological, emotional, spiritual and social health. Healthy behaviors can keep you well and help you better cope with stress.

PRODUCED BY THE DEFENSE HEALTH AGENCY

Released June 2012 | Revised May 2022 by the Traumatic Brain Injury Center of Excellence

This product is reviewed annually and is current until superseded. 800-870-9244 • Health.mil/TBICoE

Do you have questions about this fact sheet? Feedback? Email dha.TBICoEinfo@mail.mil

WHAT ARE SOME STRATEGIES I CAN USE FOR SELF-CARE?



Maintain adequate sleep. Most adults need 7–8 hours of nightly sleep. Limited sleep can cause you to be tired, irritable and have difficulty concentrating. For more restful sleep, establish a relaxing bedtime routine, including only going to bed when feeling sleepy. Try not to use sleeping aids unless suggested by your health care provider. If overnight care is needed, consider having someone stay over to care for your loved one.

Eat a balanced diet. The food you eat can have an effect on your overall health, energy levels and ability to deal with stressful situations. A balanced diet should be low in fat, high in fiber from whole grains, fruits and vegetables and contain a variety of protein sources. It also should include drinking plenty of water.



Engage in regular exercise. Health benefits of exercise include relieving stress, reducing depression, increasing self-esteem and helping maintain your physical fitness. Keep in mind that it does not need to be strenuous; a 30-minute walk on most days is usually enough to protect your health. To help you stay on track, find a friend or relative to join you.

Practice relaxation techniques. It is important to take breaks so your body and mind can rest. Try meditation, mindfulness, or deep breathing. Simply set aside 5–10 minutes a day to read a book, write in a journal or listen to calming music.



Establish and maintain supportive relationships. Consider engaging in social and community events or join a support group to connect with others in a similar situation. Focus on positive relationships and make an effort to stay in touch with people who have provided you with support. Check out the [DOD Military Caregiver Support page](#) for more resources.

Minimize use of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs. Using substances to cope with stress can lead to misuse and interfere with your family responsibilities.



Seek routine medical care. Make a goal to prioritize your own health care. Routine screenings and regular check-ups can help you stay strong and healthy. Remember that your mental health is equally as important as your physical health. Contact a mental health provider if you begin to feel overwhelmed.

HELPFUL DOD AND VA APPS



Breathe2Relax

Provides instructions on diaphragmatic “belly” breathing which can help reduce anxiety and stress.



Virtual Hope Box

Contains simple tools to help users with coping, relaxation, distraction and positive thinking strategies.



Tactical Breather

Provides guided breathing instructions to help gain control over heart rate, emotions and concentration during stressful situations.



Mindfulness Coach

Provides a gradual, self-guided training program designed to help in understanding and adopting a simple mindfulness practice.



For more information and resources, refer to TBICoE's [Traumatic Brain Injury: A Guide for Caregivers of Service Members and Veterans](#).