Caring for yourself while you care for someone with cancer



Partners inCare | Everyday support for cancer caregivers

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This information is intended for Healthcare Professionals (HCPs) only.
Esta información está destinada exclusivamente a profesionales sanitarios (HCP).
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An introduction to this guide

When a loved one receives a diagnosis of cancer, you may find yourself becoming a caregiver.

Being a caregiver to someone with cancer is a vital, yet sometimes invisible, role: one that demands dedication, strength and resilience. While being a caregiver can be highly rewarding, it can also be very tiring, both mentally and physically.[1]

Whether you have just started caring for someone or have been caregiving for a while, it is common to prioritise the wellbeing of the person you are caring for above your own – but it's still important to look after your own health and wellbeing. Looking after your own wellbeing will help you to support your loved one to the best of your ability.[1–3]

> *"Everyone wants to support but nobody knows how to give it, so you have to ask."*
>
> Merel, caregiver



This guide was created with the support of caregivers from CPE, an association of patients with all types of cancer, across 32 countries, who shared their experience and insights. It aims to help you, as a caregiver, to support yourself at the same time as you are supporting a loved one.

The intent is to provide practical tools that may help you on your caregiving journey and encourage you to be kind to yourself. Take what you need – what you feel works best for you.

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Looking after your physical, mental and emotional health

Caregiving can be very rewarding, knowing that you are there for a loved one in need. Yet there may be times when you find yourself physically, mentally, and emotionally exhausted or in need of a break. The uncertainty you experience can take its toll.[4]

If you feel these effects, remember that you are not the only one. In fact, it's common for caregivers to experience feelings of tiredness, anxiety and depression, as they prioritise the care of their loved one over their own care.[1] Both new and experienced caregivers can find themselves losing the balance between caring for themselves and their loved one. If you find yourself doing this, it might help to take a moment to consider: what advice might you give to a friend in your position?

> *"A fundamental but unmet need to be a good or a better carer, is to receive emotional and psychological support"*
>
> Antonella, caregiver

Physical wellbeing



It can be easy to forget about exercising or eating properly when you're busy looking after someone else.[5] You may not feel like you have the time to dedicate to yourself, which might result in you overlooking key elements of self-care.

The good news is you don't always have to make huge changes to notice an improvement in your wellbeing. Even little steps can make a difference.

Making time for movement

- It's recommended that most adults get 30 minutes of exercise each day,[6] but as a caregiver this may seem impossible. The following advice could help you include physical activity in your life – remember, **even a little helps**
- Something as simple as going for a walk can make a world of difference.[7] If your loved one is feeling up to it, you may wish to go out for a walk together
- Activities like jogging and cycling can give you a chance to get away and relax, offering some **distraction from the day-to-day** routine
- Try integrating exercise into your day-to-day activities – taking the stairs instead of the lift when you're not with your loved one; **moving around** rather than sitting when you're on the phone[8]
- Planning ahead by scheduling exercise into your week might also help

Eating a balanced diet and keeping hydrated

- Even when you know that a balanced diet is important, it can be difficult to achieve when time is scarce[9]
- You may find that **preparing meals in advance** – for a whole day or week, for example – helps you to maintain a healthy diet. Cooking in batches can help to save time, and freezing food can help as well[9]
- If your loved one has a special diet, consider **planning your meals** so that you can use the same ingredients, and save time by avoiding having to cook separate meals
- If you forget to drink water when you're busy, it could help to **carry a water bottle** that you drink from throughout the day





Getting enough sleep and tackling fatigue

- If you are feeling stressed or worried because of caregiving, then getting the recommended 7 to 9 hours of sleep a night[10] can be difficult
- Try not to overdo your daily to-do list – **be realistic about what you can do each day**, and remember to space out your tasks with regular breaks[11]
- See if you can adjust your schedule so that you go to bed at the same time every night, and avoid screen time before bed[12]

If you are worried about your physical health or sleep patterns, or you notice your health getting worse, please speak with your doctor.

Mental and emotional wellbeing



Caregiving can evoke a wide range of emotions – these may be positive or negative. For example, you may experience feelings of love, purpose and resilience, but you may also feel fear, guilt, or frustration. All of these are normal feelings.

Ongoing worry, responsibility, and decision-making can take a toll on your mental and emotional wellbeing. Potential ways to address this include:

Taking breaks when you need them[5,13]

- These could be **short breaks in the day**, such as 10 minutes to step outside or do some breathing exercises, or half an hour to have a walk, read a book or listen to some music and clear your head. Or, if you need a longer break, ask around to see if a trusted person can cover your caregiving duties while you take the time away that you need[5]
- Don't forget about any **hobbies and activities** that bring you joy and recharge you – either by yourself, with a loved one or as a family – like watching a film or playing cards[5]
- **Walking your dog** or spending time with pets can provide a sense of healing
- Be vigilant to signs of 'burnout' – such as exhaustion, difficulty concentrating and irritability – and seek support when you notice the signs[13]

Trying relaxation techniques to calm your mind and breathing at difficult times[5]

- Mindfulness practices, such as **meditation or breathing exercises**, may help to reduce stress and tension. If you don't know where to start with these, there are mobile phone apps and online videos available to help you[5]
- Research shows that if you have a spiritual practice, these connections and practices can support your emotional health and mood, helping you feel hopeful and fostering a greater sense of meaning and purpose[14]

Setting realistic limits on what you can do[5]

- Where possible, it's better to be honest about your capacity than to overpromise.[5] When considering your limits, remember that caregiving is a marathon, not a sprint[2]
- Accepting help from your support circle will help you to make your day more manageable[5]
- If you need a temporary break from caregiving, you may **consider respite care**. This is where a professional steps in to look after your loved one. This might be in their home (e.g. nurse visits), or they might visit a day centre, or spend a few days in a care home or hospice. Your doctor or nurse (depending on your healthcare system) can tell you what help might be available in your area[5,15,16]



Embracing uncertainty and reframing situations you can't change[5]

- Many caregivers worry about what the future holds. If you are having these worries, then you're not alone.[5] Remember to take life one day at a time
- It may help to **write down any worries you have**. This can help you prioritise your concerns and how to address them[17]
- **Reframing a situation** – for example, by considering other perspectives or recognising positive aspects alongside the difficult ones – can sometimes help you to see the bigger picture[17]
- End your day by thinking about the good aspects of the day, and finding comfort in the things that went well

Talking openly with someone you trust about how you're feeling and discussing any difficulties you feel comfortable sharing[18]

- You may find it helpful to **speak to someone** who knows your situation well, such as a friend or family member, or you may be more comfortable speaking to someone who is distanced from your day-to-day life
- If you would prefer to speak to someone in a similar position to you, you may wish to **connect with a support group.** It really makes a difference when you hear from others who have walked in your shoes. See page 14 of this guide for links to local support groups



“Sometimes we put far too much pressure on ourselves, looking two, three, four years down the road. Enjoy the moment that you’re in. And I think that’s hugely important.”

Jacqueline, caregiver





Taking control of your thoughts and remembering what a difference you are making

- It is natural to feel worried, but anxious thoughts can sometimes be unhelpful – for example, always expecting the worst outcome or feeling as though you are the cause of negative situations. Tuning in to thoughts like these can help you catch them and identify them as unhelpful, although it can take practice. Once you have identified unhelpful thoughts, you can take a step back to **reexamine the situation and reframe them**[19]
- When you've been caregiving for a while and are rooted in day-to-day tasks, it's easy to let the constant flow of thoughts take over and forget how much of a difference you are making
- Journaling your experiences may help give you time to digest information and process emotions. You may also find sharing your journal with family and friends is an easier way to keep them up to date

If you are worried about your mental and emotional health, or you notice it worsening, seek professional support. This could be through your doctor, who may refer you for counselling or therapy. Or it could be through a support group that offers professional support for caregivers.

Practical tip: Remember that asking for mental health support is a strength, not a failure

Finding your support networks



Becoming a caregiver can feel lonely.[19,20] You may often need someone to speak to, or to be there for you in more practical ways, to help with your day-to-day responsibilities.

While it may seem difficult to ask for help, reaching out is a strength. It's completely normal to not have all of the answers all of the time.

Practical tip: Remember, it is important you get additional support if and when you need it – for yourself, and for the person you are caring for.[3]

The support you need will change over time,[20] with the circumstances of the person that you are caring for – for example, whether they are staying in hospital or at home. Your own circumstances may change as well.

Clearly communicating your needs is important to ensure you can be supported in a way that is helpful and meaningful to you.

"I always wanted to be a strong person. I live alone, and I am very independent. But it's not a weakness to share your fears with other people [...]. It can give you more strength to cope with being a caregiver."

Conchi, caregiver

Where to find help



Besides turning to friends and family, it can help to reach out to people outside your inner circle.[19] You may feel more comfortable discussing some topics with professionals or people that have experience of being caregivers themselves.

Some ways you may seek support include:

Friends and family

- Those closest to you may form an integral part of your support network
- Remember, many people who want to help you may not know how; it is important to **ask for help when you need it**. Try to think about specific ways that they could help.

Could they pick up your children from school, or babysit while you are going to doctor's appointments? Could they help with routine tasks, like cooking and cleaning, freeing up more time for you to care for and even find some space for yourself?[21]

Joining a caregiver support group[19,20]

- These groups may meet in person, by phone, or over the internet; they offer a **space for caregivers to come together,** share their experiences and seek help
- If they haven't already, your loved one may wish to join a patient support group – this could offer them an opportunity to meet other patients and their caregivers, which could benefit both of you
- Your loved one's healthcare team are a valuable source of information for you and your family, and can help connect you with local groups

Connecting, or re-connecting, with community or faith-based groups[14]

- There is some research to suggest that these connections and practices can support your emotional health and mood, helping you feel hopeful and fostering a greater sense of meaning and purpose[14]

Speaking to your doctor, who may refer you for some counselling, or to a community nurse or social worker[19]

- Your loved one's healthcare team may also be able to provide additional support to you as a caregiver



Finding caregiver support organisations

There are lots of organisations, groups and services that offer emotional, financial and practical support for caregivers. These groups provide support to new caregivers who are finding their feet as well as longstanding caregivers.

Below we've shared some support groups that have a large online presence. You may find others, including local support groups, by talking to your loved one's medical team or local hospital, or through online forums.

- **Macmillan Cancer Support**: https://www.macmillan.org.uk/cancer-information-and-support/supporting-someone
- **European Cancer Organisation**: https://www.europeancancer.org/caregivers
- **Marie Curie** – Hospice and Carer Support: https://www.mariecurie.org.uk/
- **Caregiver Action Network**: https://www.caregiveraction.org/
- **HelpGuide.org**: https://www.helpguide.org/
- **World Health Organization (WHO)** – online course to support informal caregivers across Europe, offering advice on how to provide care for themselves as well as others: https://whoacademy.org/coursewares/course-v1:WHOAcademy-Hosted+WHOA0107_CIC1_EN+2025_Q4

Managing daily pressures



As a caregiver, you may face competing demands on your time, energy, and attention. You may often find yourself juggling different roles and demands at the same time.[20]

The coordination and planning required as a caregiver can be especially challenging when added to other responsibilities such as work or supporting young children or ageing parents.[22] It can feel like a second job in addition to your other roles.

We've shared some ideas on the next page to help you keep life in balance and ensure you are looking after your own needs, as well as those of the person you're caring for.

> *"Me, I always say, you have to go little by little. [...] Try to be calm, have patience, give yourself a lot of love and patience, and to the patient as well, [...] because it's really difficult to deal with this."*
>
> Stephanie, caregiver

Juggling work and caregiving



You may find that your work is impacted by your new caregiving role. It could be that you need to attend medical appointments with your loved one or call in on them more often than before. Or, more generally, caregiving may have made you feel low on energy and less able to commit to your work.[18]

If you are in employment and finding it tricky to balance your job and role as caregiver, you might want to try the following:

Speaking to your manager or HR representative

- Companies often have rules and policies related to illness in the family, for example employee assistance or benefit programmes. You may be able to use your paid sick leave to take care of your loved one, work half-days or split shifts, or take off one day a week for doctor visits[5,18]
- If your company does not have fixed policies in place, you might benefit from speaking with your employers to arrange something informally – for example flex-time, adjusting your schedule, or working from home when needed[18]
- If your company's policies prevent you from fulfilling your caregiving role, there may be wider employment rights and legal protections that can help you. Employment rights and legal protections vary from country to country[22]
- You can ask for any conversations to be kept confidential

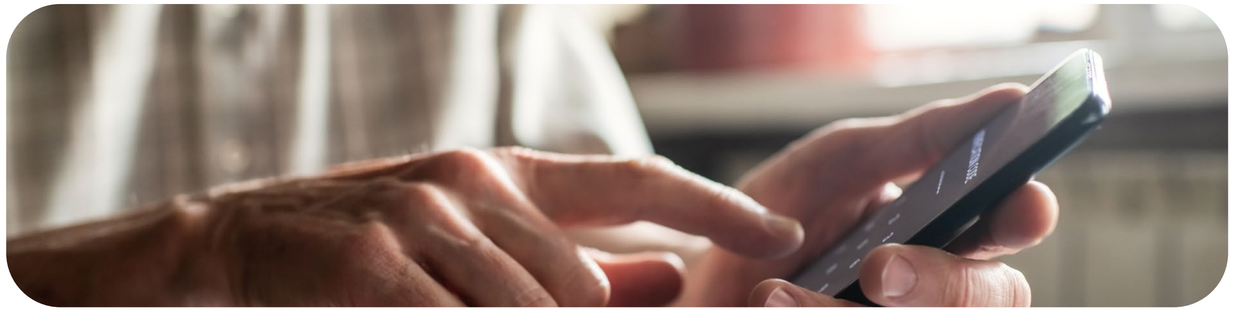
Understanding exactly what is impacting your work and how you can work around it

- For example, is it too many appointments? If so, see if someone else could support your loved one at an upcoming appointment or, more long term, see if you can split the commitment to free up some time for you
- Are you feeling tired or low on energy? Take a look at our physical and mental wellbeing tips in Section 1 to see how you can maintain your energy levels. If you have any concerns regarding your health, it's a good idea to speak to your doctor
- Not enough hours in the day? You may wish to speak to your company about modifying your hours or workload, to ease the burden of employment alongside caregiving

Handling money worries

It may not be the first thing you think of when you become a caregiver, but both new and longstanding caregivers can find themselves facing unexpected costs relating to their role. These costs could come from supporting a loved one directly – perhaps through providing transportation or helping them financially – or indirectly from unpaid leave from work or reduced hours/income.[22,23]

Given how much you may have on your plate already, it might be tempting to push finances to the bottom of your list of concerns.[23] But if you have money worries because of caregiving, or you anticipate having them at some point in the future, then the following may help:



Setting realistic limits on what you can do[5]

- Setting up a simple system for tracking costs and keeping careful records, to help spot potential money issues at an early stage[5]
  - You can keep your records in a dedicated notepad or in an app on your phone – whichever works best for you
  - Remember to keep your receipts relating to caregiving as well: you may need them to claim benefits or expenses
- Speaking to your lenders to let them know your situation – for example, if you are having difficulties keeping up with mortgage payments, speak to your mortgage provider – they may be able to make allowances
- Reaching out to support services – remember that these are there to help you, so try to make the most of them. Caregiving organisations and support groups can often signpost to avenues for financial support as well as offering emotional and practical aspects of support[5,18,20]
- **Making sure you are aware of any benefits for which you might be eligible, to help ease the financial burden[5]**

Planning your time



Even experienced caregivers can find it difficult to juggle the logistical needs of their role alongside the day-to-day tasks in their own lives.[20] It can be tough at times, and you're not alone if you feel this way.

Tips to help you plan your time include:

- **Building your own support group**: Think about the people in your life who could offer a hand with everyday tasks, or simply be there when things feel heavy. Leaning on this network around you — however small — can make your day-to-day life feel a little more manageable
- **Spending 15 minutes at the start of each day working out your priorities and 'to-do' list**
  - Break large tasks into smaller steps to tackle one at a time
  - Some people prefer the simplicity of paper lists, while others prefer using their mobile phone as it's with them for most of the day – go for whatever works best for you
  - Use alarms or reminders on your phone to keep track of tasks such as medication, appointments and check-ins
- **Let yourself focus on now:** Thinking and planning too far ahead can be overwhelming; allowing yourself to focus on what needs to happen today, or even this morning, may help make everything feel more manageable



“The most important thing is to find the best information, the most relevant resources that can help.”

Michael, caregiver

- **Making a list of the names and contact details** of everyone on the cancer care team and keeping it somewhere readily available, so you don't need to wade through paperwork each time you want to contact someone[5,18]
  - Key contacts could include primary physicians, cancer nurse specialists, community nurses, pharmacists and more, as well as the out-of-hours support line
- **Asking a trusted person for help** with basic jobs[18]
  - If you have a trusted support network, you may wish to reach out for help with your own errands – which you may have neglected due to caregiving – or for jobs and tasks for your loved one[18]
  - Asking others to help with some tasks is a way of taking care of your loved one, because it lets you focus on the tasks you feel you should do yourself[18]
- **Connecting with healthcare teams** and other support services for your loved one at the earliest opportunity
  - Reaching out to arrange support and services proactively, instead of when you are already overwhelmed, may make your life easier
  - Support services may include hospital transport, patient support groups, food delivery services, and so on. Different areas have different services available, so do reach out and see what's there for you if you need it



Practical tip: Try to be specific about what would help. You could consider making a list of tasks you can share – for example, helping with household chores, picking up prescriptions, or driving to doctor's appointments.[18,19]



Don’t forget to be kind to yourself

Caregivers like you have a vital and rewarding, yet demanding, role. **Give yourself a break** as you navigate the caregiving journey and remember you are making a huge difference.

But one person can’t do everything; it’s normal to seek help and connection as you take on the role of caregiver. There are support networks that can help you, and you may have trusted family and friends you can lean on too. You shouldn’t be alone in this.

Your time with the person you’re caring for is precious. Try to make the best of each day, enjoy moments wherever you can and try not to dwell on what might come next.

You’re doing something amazing by supporting your loved one through this difficult time – don’t forget that.



“Carpe diem has been my take home message from my experience as caregiver and as a cancer patient. Enjoy the present and make it enjoyable for the people surrounding you.”

Conchi, caregiver

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