

The Caregiver's Handbook

Section 2

TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF

This section looks at managing stress and maintaining your physical and mental health and well-being. There is a stress quiz to help you think about the level and causes of your stress, and practical tips on how to manage it. There is also a guide to healthy eating, exercise, and sleep.

The stress quiz can be downloaded as a blank template from our website.

Help for Unpaid Caregivers
in Nova Scotia


Caregivers
Nova Scotia
for friends and family giving care

www.CaregiversNS.org

Taking Care of Yourself

**I do take walks. I just have to.
I need to get out, just for relief ... I love them.**

Caregiving can be very rewarding and a way to fulfill familial obligations or give back to someone who has helped you or others in the past. But it is also hard work. Finding time for yourself and staying healthy are essential, yet like most caregivers, you're probably wondering just where you'll find that time.

What does it mean to be healthy?

Health has been defined in different ways at different times and by different groups. Today, health is broadly defined and includes physical, mental, social, and spiritual well-being.

Recent studies show that the demands of caregiving can negatively affect health, and lead to physical and psychological distress.² Caregivers reported feelings of depression and helplessness, physical injury, high blood pressure, poor eating habits, and disturbed sleep¹¹ as a result of their caregiving responsibilities.

More time spent on caregiving means less time for leisure and social activities,¹¹ and can result in lost friendships and family conflict.

Exercise: What does 'being healthy' mean to you...

Physically?

Mentally?

Socially?

Spiritually?

Do you feel healthy? What things in your life help to improve your health? What things in your life affect your health negatively?

For many caregivers, the most challenging thing about achieving and maintaining good health is finding balance, especially when they are faced with so many competing demands.

**I feel like I'm a teacher, I'm a daughter, I'm a wife,
I'm a psychologist ... I'm everything.**

Here are a few tips that might help you find a healthy balance.

Managing Stress

We all feel stressed from time to time. In fact, small amounts of stress are beneficial as they may help us to stay alert and focused. Long or intense periods of stress, however, can be extremely hard on your physical and mental health. The Canadian Mental Health Association recommends that everyone take some time to: **think about the level and causes of their stress, talk about it, reduce tension, and prevent future stress.**

For caregivers, these steps are especially important to help prevent 'caregiver burnout'.

Step 1: Check In On Your Stress Level

This quiz may help you to reflect on how you're feeling and to think about the level of stress in your life.

	Never	Sometimes	Often	Almost Always
I find it difficult to balance work, family, and caregiving responsibilities	0	1	2	3
I have conflicts with my friends, family members, or care recipient	0	1	2	3
I worry that I am not doing a good job as a caregiver	0	1	2	3
I feel guilty	0	1	2	3
I feel anxious	0	1	2	3
I feel sad and cry periodically	0	1	2	3
I have problems with sleep	0	1	2	3
I experience chronic neck or back pain	0	1	2	3
I have tension headaches	0	1	2	3

Your Score

- 0 - 10 You are probably managing well. Remember that it's still important to think about ways of preventing stress from building up.
- 11 - 15 You may need to seek out some additional support. Try to identify the things that are causing you stress – you may not be able to change all of them, but there may be areas where you can ask for help or make changes to relieve some of your stress.
- 16 -19 You may be experiencing caregiver distress and your responsibilities may already be taking a toll on your physical and emotional well-being. It is important that you talk to your doctor or healthcare professional, a family member, friend, or join a support group to help reduce your level of distress.
- 20 + You may be experiencing caregiver burnout. To protect your physical and mental health, it is important that you talk to your family doctor or healthcare professional today about your stress. You may also want to talk with family or friends, or join a support group.

This quiz and its scoring are meant as a guide to help you reflect on the stress in your life and how you are managing it. It should not be used in place of advice from your doctor or healthcare professional.

Also, keep in mind that your score will change depending on when you take this quiz and where you are in your caregiving journey. If you took this quiz on three different days, you might have three very different scores. Please check back from time to time to see how you are doing.

This quiz was downloaded from www.von.ca and adapted for this Handbook.

Step 2: Figure Out What Causes You Stress

Stressors can range from major life events like changing jobs or the death of a loved one, to long-term worries about your finances or health, to daily hassles like traffic jams or household chores. It may help you to think of the things in your own life that are contributing to your stress level.

Below is a list of things that commonly cause stress:

- Increase in responsibility: caregiving, work or employment
- Changes in your family: marriage, new baby, separation, divorce
- Loss of a partner, family member, or friend
- Personal conflict: with a partner, family members, friends, co-workers, boss, healthcare providers
- Financial concerns: making ends meet, paying debts, planning for the future
- Change in environment: new school, job, community
- Changes in sexual activity: a new partner, lack of desire, sexual health concerns
- Health and physiological changes: injury, illness, pregnancy, menopause
- Drug use, alcoholism, self-harm

There is space for you to write about the stressors in your life on the following page.

What are some of the stressors in your life?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Step 3: Talk About It

I have several girlfriends who provide a lot of emotional support for me...they, like the Caregivers' support group sessions, allow me the freedom to express my feelings of anger, resentment, guilt – and to share some of the more humorous aspects of our daily lives.

Friends and family members are often the first people to turn to for support. If there is someone in your life who you think would listen and be supportive, start by calling them or inviting them over for a visit.

Support groups can help you relieve stress, find resources, and reduce feelings of isolation by sharing experiences and information with others. To find an active support group in your area, contact Caregivers Nova Scotia or go to the 'How We Help' section of our website. You can also contact us to find out about our next *Caregiver Stress Management* workshop.

Your family doctor is another person who may be able to help. Tell the doctor about your feelings and ask for advice. You may be referred to a counselor or psychologist.

Your spiritual advisor may also be able to provide counseling, guidance, or advice during times of need.

Step 4: Reduce Tension

Physical activity is a great way to reduce stress, and there is a wealth of medical evidence to support its overall health benefits. Whether you take walks, garden, play a sport, or perform simple stretches, daily physical activity can help to lower blood pressure, strengthen bones, and improve balance, among other things.

Take breaks. Short breaks can be a good way to ease tension, and give you a chance to relax and recharge. You can be creative with what you do depending on the time you have. Here are some suggestions:*

10 minutes

- Make a cup of tea or coffee
- Write in a journal
- Use social media to connect to other caregivers online

15-30 minutes

- Call a friend
- Knit
- Go for a short walk or run
- Follow a guided relaxation exercise

And remember to **laugh**.

He who laughs, lasts!
- Mary Pettibone Poole

On the following page we have included a 15-minute guided relaxation exercise for you to try. This and other relaxation exercises may help you to better cope, and offer a good reason to take a few minutes for yourself each day.

*Adapted from: *Creative Ways to Take Caregiving Breaks*.
www.saintelizabeth.com

Guided Relaxation Exercise

If possible, set aside 15 minutes each day when you are not likely to be interrupted to do this guided relaxation exercise.

Find a place where you feel most comfortable. This could be the bedroom, your favourite chair, or the backyard. Sit comfortably or lay down on your back with your arms resting at your side.

Take a deep breath and exhale slowly. Breathe in through your nose for a slow count of seven, hold your breath for a moment, and breathe out through your mouth for a slow count of seven. Repeat this several times, as you focus only on your breath as it fills your lungs and expands your chest.

As you breathe, focus on the parts of your body where you hold tension. As you inhale, imagine that your breath moves to that area of tension. As you exhale, the tension flows out of your body with your breath. You may want to start by focusing attention on your toes and then working your way up to your knees, legs, lower back, chest, arms, neck, face...breathe in slowly through your nose, and exhale through your mouth as you release the tension in each of these areas.

Now take a moment to scan your body. Repeat the tense and relax exercise a few times for any areas that still feel tense.

Take a few more minutes to breathe in through your nose for a slow count of seven, hold your breath, and breathe out through your mouth for a slow count of seven.

To learn more about guided relaxation or to find additional exercises, try searching the internet by typing 'guided relaxation' into your web browser. There are many websites with a variety of video and audio options available. You can also check your local library or bookstore.

Step 5: Prevent Stress

Keep up with the above activities even when you're feeling less stressed. This will help to prevent stress from building up again. A few other things you can do to prevent stress are:

Educate yourself – about your care recipient's condition and about tasks you may need to carry out. This will help you feel better prepared and less anxious in your role as caregiver.

Make decisions – avoiding decisions causes worry and stress.

Avoid putting things off – make a weekly schedule that includes leisure activities and time for yourself whenever possible.

Delegate – get others to do tasks so that you are not trying to do everything by yourself.

Make your own health a priority – part of being a caregiver means caring for yourself.

For more information on managing stress or other aspects of your mental health, contact:

The Mental Health Association of Nova Scotia

Toll-free: 1 866 227 4642 | www.mentalhealthns.ca

Mental Health Mobile Crisis Team

Toll-free: 1-888-429-8167

Caregivers Nova Scotia

You can speak to one of our Support Coordinators about attending a support group in your area and to find out when our next *Caregiver Stress Management* workshop is offered.

Acknowledging Your Feelings

Guilt, anger, frustration, and grief are all emotions that caregivers may experience, especially if there have been recent changes with your care recipient, or changes at work, with money, in the home, or in other aspects of your life.

It's important to acknowledge your feelings and remember that you're not alone. Keep in mind that approximately one-third of Nova Scotians are caregivers and many of them have the same feelings you do. Try to express your anger in helpful ways, grieve when you need to, and celebrate the happy moments too.

If negative feelings become overwhelming, or you feel depressed or anxious, talk to your doctor, counselor, or another healthcare professional.

Strive for balance, not perfection

Try to set realistic goals. Know your limits and say “no” to taking on more than you can handle.

If you do find yourself with too much to do, ask for help. Asking for and accepting help are important skills, and it is not always easy to do either.

How to Ask

Ask for help with specific tasks. Use the ‘To Do’ List discussed on pages 24 and 25 to give people suggestions about what they can do to support you. Many people are eager to help but are not sure what they can do, so the more specific you are the better.

Take time for yourself

Although this is easier said than done, it is also very important. In the short-term, even a 15-minute break can help you feel refreshed and energized. For more ideas on short breaks, see page 41.

In the long term, take advantage of respite care if possible. You can ask close friends and family members to stay with your care recipient and give you a break. Or you can contact an organization which may provide a few hours of in-home support or provide several days or weeks of facility-based respite care so that you can take a vacation. Try to use respite time to do something for yourself instead of running more errands. Visit with a friend, join a fitness class, or start a new hobby.

Try to organize respite care in advance, so it is there when you need it. This may be challenging depending on demand where you live and on what services are available. Planning in advance will also give your care recipient time to get used to someone else helping out.

For more information on what organizations provide respite care (both public and private), see pages 64 and 65.

Where to Turn

You never know where you'll find help when you need it. Start by browsing through this Handbook. The sections titled 'Services in Nova Scotia' and 'Information and Support' might give you some ideas. You can also contact us.

Turn to family members, friends, neighbours, a local community group, religious organization, or your spiritual advisor.

Find out if your employer offers an Employee Assistance Program (EAP). An EAP can provide you with access to a qualified counseling professional who can help you resolve personal and work-related problems. EAP practitioners act as a link between employees who need assistance and the appropriate source of help. It is a confidential service, accessible to all employees and their dependents. Participation in an EAP is voluntary.

Healthy Eating, Exercise, and Sleep

The following recommendations from Canada's Guide to Healthy Eating and Physical Activity can help you to maintain both your physical and mental health.

Healthy Eating

We know that health is improved by:

- enjoying foods from each of the four food groups
- eating mainly grain products, vegetables, and fruits
- drinking skim, partly-skim, or reduced-fat milk
- baking, broiling, or microwaving food instead of frying it
- eating more peas, beans, and lentils
- snacking on chips and chocolate less often

Physical Activity

You can also improve your health by:

- getting 30-60 minutes of moderate physical activity each day (including things like gardening, housework, and walking)
- choosing a variety of activities
 - for your heart, lungs, and circulatory system (biking, swimming, dancing, brisk walking)
 - to keep your muscles relaxed and your joints mobile (Yoga, Tai Chi, simple stretches)
 - to strengthen muscles and bones and to improve posture (lifting small weights, Pilates)

This doesn't mean you need to work out at the gym for an hour each day. You can build your physical activity through the day in periods of at least 10 minutes each. As a caregiver, some of the activities you do are likely physically demanding. Although these do contribute to your daily physical activities, they may also be stressful. Try to balance these caregiving activities with less stressful types that will also give you a break.

Sleep

Sleep is very important. It allows your body to restore itself and prepare for the next day. When you don't get enough sleep, you might be edgy, less able to deal with stressful situations, and more prone to illness.

The reality is that many people, especially caregivers, do not get eight hours of sleep each night. As a caregiver, you may need to get up during the night to assist your care recipient or you may be anxious that something will happen when they get up on their own, all of which contribute to disturbed sleep.

Below are a few tips on how to improve the quality and quantity of sleep for caregivers:¹²

- Try to maintain a regular sleep-wake schedule.
- Try to take a few minutes every day for exercise and fresh air if possible.
- Try to identify, talk about, and find ways to address worries and concerns before bedtime to help clear the mind for sleep.
- Set up a bedtime routine that lets you unwind before you turn out the light.
- Cut down on caffeine (coffee, tea, chocolate, cola) and nicotine during the day, and especially before bedtime.
- Nap when you can, but try to avoid the late afternoon and evening unless you know you will be awake during the night for your care recipient.
- Minimize nighttime noise or light around you. Remove clocks also, unless you need to set an alarm.
- Have something warm to drink or eat before bed.