

Self-Care for the Palliative Caregiver

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When someone you love is dying, you do not want to leave their side. You are afraid they will need you, something will happen or, worse, they will die when you are not there. You want to spend every moment with them, afraid to leave even for a much-needed shower or rest. You feel that no one else can provide the quality of care your loved one needs and deserves. So, you stay and do everything in your power to be there and do it all.

I know this from my own personal experience. After we left the hospital and entered the palliative care unit, I can honestly say that I was able to breathe a little easier. I knew that my brother would receive the best care possible and that we, his family and caregivers, who arrived mentally, physically, and emotionally exhausted, would be welcomed and supported with open arms by both the staff and volunteers. And we were.

After speaking with caregivers who are now looking after loved ones who are dying, I can see their stress and feel their fear. Knowing now what I did not know then is that they are at risk of caregiver burnout. Some symptoms of caregiver burnout include:

- Being on the verge of tears
- Feeling helpless or hopeless
- Overreacting to minor nuisances
- Feeling constantly exhausted
- Decrease in work productivity
- Withdrawing from social contacts
- Change in eating and sleeping patterns
- Inability to relax
- Scattered thinking

Respite, even a brief break, is one way to make sure you take care of yourself during this most difficult time. While it is not easy to leave, even taking short breaks to take care of your



own personal needs and to re-energize yourself is healthy and necessary. Doing something for yourself does not mean you do not love your care recipient or that you do not care that they are dying. It simply means that you need to be healthy to be able to continue your caregiving. Try to take a respite break at least once a week by doing something just for you.

- Stop for a cup of tea or coffee with a friend
- Exercise, even getting out for a short walk
- Tinker in the workshop
- Read a magazine or one chapter of a book
- Enjoy a bubble bath or shower with music or candles
- Watch a movie or game
- *Meditate, pray or self-reflect
- Visit with a friend

It is important to recognize when you may be close to experiencing symptoms of caregiver burnout. Once you burn out, caregiving is no longer a healthy option for you or your care recipient. Take steps to protect yourself so you can carry on doing exactly what you want to do, care for your loved one.

*To access a 4-minute online guided meditation please go to http://www.morethanmedication.ca/en/article/index/simple_meditation