# Care for the Caregiver

While healthcare organizations may be focused on individuals with specific diseases or illnesses, the impact on the caregivers may often be overlooked. According to the Family Caregiver Alliance, family caregivers report significant challenges in caring for their health while managing caregiving responsibilities. Over 50% of caregivers report clinical depression, difficulty sleeping, and poor eating and exercise habits regardless of age, sex, race, ethnicity, and financial status.

The emotional roller coaster of caregiving, along with the everyday demands of life, increases the risk of excessive use of alcohol, tobacco and other unhealthy habits.

Caregivers are more likely to have chronic illnesses such as high cholesterol and high blood pressure and are at an increased risk of being overweight. While most caregivers know the importance of healthy habits, the demands of time, energy, and other practical resources make things more challenging.

A Wellness Resource to Use Throughout Your Life
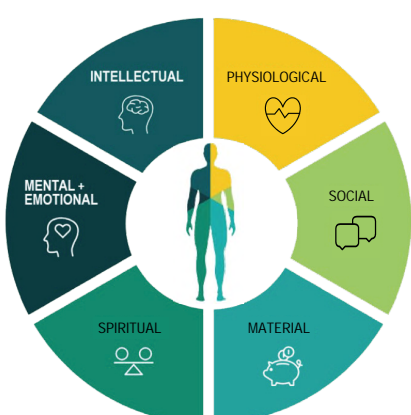
These strategies are designed to be able to use whether you are caregiving from a hospital room, at home, in another's home, or simply have a moment to take for yourself. It's essential to recognize these simple, sometimes small strategies are powerful ways to take the best care of yourself.

Each category has something you can do for one minute OM, one hour OH, or one day OD.
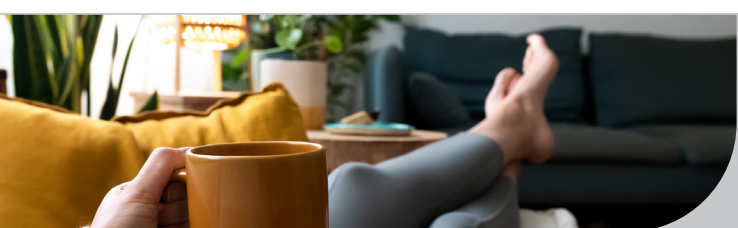
RESTORATIVE & RELAXATION

When we are constantly stressed, we may feel tense and on alert. Our bodies respond to these feelings by continuing to produce hormones such as cortisol and endorphins that keep us going. Still, over time they can contribute to unwanted side effects such as weight gain.

OM Try box breathing. Take a slow deep breath in for four counts. Hold your breath for four counts. Slowly release for four counts. Hold your breath for four counts and repeat for up to five rounds. As you do this, you will notice that holding your breath may be uncomfortable initially. Still, as you continue to repeat more rounds, this feeling will lessen as you feel more relaxed.

OH Use a meditation app such as Calm, look for a YouTube video, or start your favorite playlist. Turn notifications off, or ideally, use a device other than your phone. Set a timer for a minimum of 15 minutes, look for a comfortable space, or head outside to enjoy nature.

OD Consider your thoughts and the voices in your head today. We can be our worst critics and be very hard on ourselves, especially when we feel overwhelmed. Today, tune into what you are telling yourself and shift the conversation to one of support and encouragement. Remind yourself how well you are doing. Every time you use the restroom today, tell yourself that "I got this."
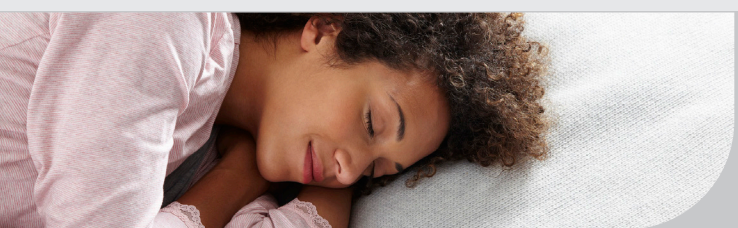
SLEEP

While sleep is one of the most essential tools we need to function properly both physically and mentally, it's often one that we steal from as we are looking for extra time in our day or because our brains continue to keep us awake. We may also feel that we need to stay awake or are awake due to the immediate needs of the individual for whom we are caring.

OM Name five things you are grateful for today when going to bed. You can keep these in your head or write them in a journal.

OH Grab a catnap. Many things can wait for you to refuel your energy. Use headphones and a sleep mask (keep one in your bag), and add white noise or music. Set the alarm so you can relax, knowing that it will tell you when to get up and move!

OD Get out of bed and get moving today by taking a minute of movement and getting some direct light (ideally sunlight, but indoor light is also great.)

PHYSICAL

Physical activity and exercise are beneficial for your energy and weight management and help manage emotional well-being.

OM Do each of these exercises for 10 counts: March in place, 10 arm circles each way, and torso rotation. Repeat if desired.

OH Set aside one hour for planned physical exercise. If you can't make it to a physical space, use a resource such as YouTube. Look for options such as yoga, walking at home or bodyweight strength training. Check out our Cancer Support page for more ideas: hcamidwest.com/cancerwellness.

OD Set a timer to move every hour. If you are stuck in a chair, march in place or go from seated to standing as often as possible. If you can move more, take a quick and brisk walk followed by 10 of any strength movement. Try squats, lunges, standing on one leg, countertop push-ups, or plank holds on a chair.

NUTRITIONAL

Eating balanced whole-food meals may be difficult for caregivers. Not only time being a limiting factor, but when we are stressed we often crave sweet, salty or fatty foods, and these are often readily available on the go. Good nutrition will help you to maximize your energy and support a healthy immune system.

OM Start your day with a big glass of water. Put this out in your bathroom or kitchen to remind you before you reach for anything else.

OH Add a protein snack in the afternoon. Try a ready-to-drink shake (which are easy to find at most convenience stores) or keep your fridge stocked so you can put these into your bag on the go. Look for snacks such as Greek yogurt or roasted chickpea snacks for other options.

OD Choose one day each week that you will eat 4-6 servings of whole fruits and vegetables. Look for precut veggies or an apple to grab and go or keep your freezer stocked with frozen fruits and vegetables to add to a smoothie or heat up for a quick dinner.
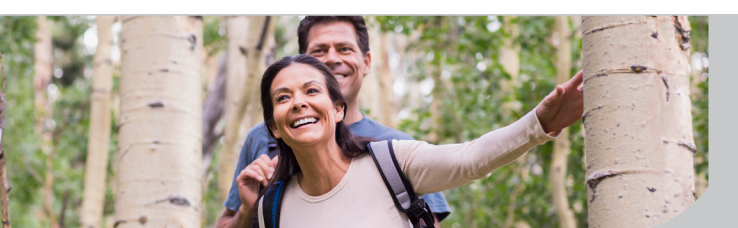
EMOTIONAL

Many caregivers experience a lack of attention and support for their own emotional needs and challenges. It's normal to feel anxious, stressed and isolated when you are responsible for someone who may be sick and unable to take care of themselves.

OM Identify a quote that you love or one that can put words into how you are feeling. This can be something simple such as I am strong to identifying a quote from someone who has persevered through adversity or a Bible verse. Write it down, add it to your phone wallpaper or put it on a post it on your mirror.

OH Spend 10 minutes in the morning, afternoon and evening doing something you enjoy that's just for you. Is this reading, walking, listening to music, doing yoga, cooking a meal or doing a puzzle? Make this something for yourself. If three times a day is difficult, get up early and target 30 minutes in the morning.

OD Find connection and support for yourself. This can be joining an online or in-person support group, watching or going to church, calling a friend or watching a YouTube video on a topic that you enjoy or helps you to feel replenished.