

## **Caring for Caregivers: 5 Skills to Keep Your Battery Charged**

2021

Caregiving can be a uniquely rewarding and challenging experience. Proper support is just as imperative for those giving care as it is for those receiving care. As humans, we are limited in our energy and mental resources – everyone has a “battery” that allows us to cope with the daily challenges and obstacles that arise in our day-to-day lives. It is important to take the time to make sure our batteries stay charged.

Many caregivers are suffering from burnout -- a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion resulting from chronic stress. There are a number of factors that can lead to burnout; these can include maintaining unrealistic expectations of yourself, family stress, limited control or resources, or lack of social support. Common signs that you may be experiencing burnout include symptoms of fatigue, trouble sleeping, feelings of disconnection, and increased irritability or cynicism. By increasing awareness of these symptoms, caregivers can work to turn inwards, learning the skills to recharge and maintain mental wellness.

### **Skill #1: Try practicing self-affirmations**

One way in which you can add simple but effective self-care in your day is by generating and practicing self-affirmations. These are positive statements generated by the process of reflecting on one’s core values. Whether you are having a hard day or need an extra boost of confidence, self-affirmations are a great skill to rely on. Research suggests that this practice can buffer stress and boost your overall health <sup>(1)</sup>. Although it may feel inauthentic at first, by choosing a statement or two each day and focusing on the core values they reflect, you may be surprised to find the extent to which these self-affirmations resonate with you.

### **Skill #2: Live in the present by practicing being mindful on daily basis**

There is growing evidence that suggests mindfulness practices have significant benefits for our physical and psychological health. The essence of mindfulness is a gentle, non-judgmental awareness of oneself and one’s surroundings in the present moment. Such an approach allows us to manage our thoughts and emotions better, especially those that can easily overwhelm us. The goal is not to avoid thoughts, but rather to let thoughts and feelings come and go.



Mindfulness practice can look like a form of meditation. You could sit down in a comfortable, quiet spot for a set period of time, close your eyes and focus on your surroundings – what you sense around you, the way your body feels, and your breathing. You do not need special equipment, and even doing this for 5-10 minutes per day can be beneficial.

### **Skill #3: Treat yourself as you'd treat a loved one**

There are moments in our lives where we all want to be self-compassionate towards ourselves. It can be when you are suffering, when you have failed at something, or feel inadequate. And in those moments, often your natural approach might be to be more self-critical with yourself, which can increase stress and frustration. Adopting a self-compassionate approach may be more difficult at first, but is an essential skill that you can build with practice.

The practice of self-compassion requires sensitivity to distress and the ability to recognize when you are feeling anxious, sad, ashamed, or any other difficult emotion. It also involves not judging yourself for your feelings, recognizing that it is okay to feel distressed. This can be hard, as we often feel isolated during times of struggle, mistakenly perceiving others to be coping better than we are. Finally, being self-compassionate also involves the desire to do, and consequently, doing what will be most helpful. Just like you see and are immediately oriented towards helping a crying child or an upset friend, you want to take that same comforting stance towards yourself.

This can look like saying or doing the same things you might do to comfort others. For example, you might use gentle language with yourself or practice some self-soothing touch, such as holding your hands over your heart, or putting your arms around yourself. Such physical gestures have been shown to have immediate physical effects on our bodies in activating the soothing parasympathetic nervous system.

### **Skill #4: Don't just speak up, speak assertively**

Caregivers may often keep from voicing their needs or wants in an attempt to preserve harmony in the household. Over time this can lead to self-doubt, resentment, frustration, and anxiety – negative feelings that can seep into different life domains and harm one's mental well-being. Assertive communication is an essential skill that is not only important when advocating for loved ones but can



be used in a variety of situations at work, school, or in personal life. Speaking assertively helps improve your own decision-making skills and communication, and more broadly, helps create positive relationships.

A simple skill to practice assertive communication is the use of “I” statements. One such instance of these statements, for example, in discussing dividing chores with your partner might sound like: “I’ve had a busy week, so I need some time to relax. I’ll help you with the yard work, but I just need an hour to wind down first.” This is preferable to statements that might sound more blaming or aggressive in the same situation, such as: “You know it’s been a long week for me. You know I’m exhausted. Can’t you just do it?” Communicating assertively in this way can help you stay firm in your boundaries and goals, and true to your values, and at the same time, can make your social interactions more constructive.

### **Skill #5: Stay connected ... even if it’s virtual**

If there is one thing that COVID has taught us, it is that a sense of connectedness is such an important part of all our lives. One of the most effective skills caregivers can develop is that of building and maintaining a support network. Research has shown that connecting with other caregivers with shared experiences can contribute to improved mental well-being, better coping skills, and a longer and healthier life (2).

And that is exactly what the CARES program sets out to do: innovating with care, this eight-week program creates a supportive environment for caregivers to learn from each other and create a sense of shared identity that fosters psychological resilience. It also provides interactive skill-building activities to help you develop your own toolkit of skills for mental well-being. As the only program of its kind, culturally responsive and peer-led, CARES provides innovative psychosocial intervention, skills training, and mental health support to empower caregivers of children on the autism spectrum.

For more information on the CARES program visit:

<https://thecaresprogram.org/the-program/>



## References

- (1) Janine M Dutcher, Naomi I Eisenberger, Hayoung Woo, William M P Klein, Peter R Harris, John M Levine, and John David Creswell. (2020). Neural mechanisms of self-affirmation's stress buffering effects. *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*. Oct; 15(10): 1086–1096. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7657454/>
- (2) M Law , S King, D Stewart, G King. (2001). The perceived effects of parent-led support groups for parents of children with disabilities. *Physical and Occupational Therapy in Pediatrics*. 21(2-3):29-48. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/12029852/>