

10 Tips for Caregivers During the Holidays

Feeling overwhelmed? Here's how to handle the stress

It's easy for caregivers to get stressed out during the holiday season.

As caregivers, many of us are already overwhelmed with our daily responsibilities, leaving us vulnerable when the stress of the holidays arrives.

During this busy season, we can be tempted to increase unhealthy behavior — such as drinking more alcohol, eating more sweets, getting less sleep and exercising less. This in turn lowers our defenses and makes every experience — both positive and negative — seem magnified. Here are some tips to help you come through the holiday season with more joy and less stress.

1. Recognize the signs of stress and burnout

As caregivers, we give and give and give, and during the holidays we give even more! All that giving can add up to high stress levels or even full-on burnout that creeps up on you before you know it.

In my book, AARP's *Juggling Work and Caregiving*, I explain it this way: "The prolonged stress builds up, we are robbed of energy, and sometimes we reach a point of total emotional, mental and physical exhaustion. We may lose motivation completely or feel we just don't care about our loved ones, our other relationships or our work. We may feel that we've lost ourselves in the vastness of caregiving and that nothing we can do will make a difference. If you feel like this most of the time, you may have reached burnout." Be aware of emotional ups and downs, fatigue levels, foggy thinking, inability to sit still or the opposite — feeling frozen and unable to get anything done.

2. Anticipate your own holiday hot buttons

Are there holiday activities or toxic relatives that trigger stress or unhappy memories? Are you feeling grief or loss that overcomes you at certain times of day? Do unhelpful relatives regularly arrive for the holidays and criticize your caregiving? Are there topics it's better to avoid when the family gathers? It may be best to limit your exposure to — or even avoid — certain places, events or people. If you can't do that, prepare yourself. Minimize the drama, don't try to resolve longtime family problems over the holidays, try short encounters and develop quick exit strategies. Mentally put yourself in a protective bubble, letting negative energy bounce off without hurting, annoying or distressing you.

3. Mind your own mind-set

Acknowledge all your emotions, including fears, frustrations and sadness, during the holidays. All those emotions are perfectly normal. Try to stay mindful, concentrating on what you are doing in any given moment, rather than letting your mind wander to your ever-growing to-do list. Stay focused on the positives: Think about what you can accomplish instead of what you can't; celebrate what your loved ones can do, rather than mourning what they can no longer participate in; revel in the holiday joys you will experience, instead of missing those you'll bypass; appreciate the help you are receiving rather than resenting those who aren't supportive. Negative thinking actually activates your body's stress response, so steer your mind elsewhere when you start down the slippery slope of negative thinking.

4. Keep self-care at the top of the list

It's easy to let this slip when you're even busier than usual — just when you need it most. Keep it simple and incorporate it into your daily caregiving routine if possible.

For example: Make time for exercise; it can boost your mood. Even something as simple as walking in a shopping mall, dancing to holiday music, or stretching or doing jumping jacks while watching holiday movies can help. Try yoga, meditation or tai chi to reduce stress and help you sleep better. Limit sugary foods that can cause an energy and emotional crash as blood sugar plummets. Get outside for some mood-elevating vitamin D from sunlight, or consider therapeutic lighting if you suffer from seasonal affective disorder. Relax with some aromatherapy, using scents such as citrus and lavender to soothe yourself.

5. Know your own best stress outlets

Only you know what works best for you as a stress reliever. It may be writing in a journal, laughing at a funny movie, talking with a friend, going for a walk or sharing your thoughts on social media such as Facebook. Make a list of outlets you can keep handy when you start to feel stressed out.

6. Connect with support

With everyone so busy this season, online message boards or groups can be a convenient way to seek support. And don't forget professional help from a counselor or therapist.

7. Plan ahead and focus on what is most meaningful

Perfection is not the goal of the holidays — joy is! Cramming more into your already crazy schedule can push you over the edge, so consider what is really doable before you commit. Remember, you'll be happier if you can go with the flow and expect the inevitable delay, crisis or disappointment. Above all, making good memories with your loved ones is especially valuable at this time.

8. Ask for help for yourself and those you care for

Now is the time to seek help with both your caregiving responsibilities and your holiday preparations or personal matters. Even if you don't usually pay for help, consider doing so now, since hiring someone to assist for a few hours can be a huge relief. A personal assistant or concierge can complete items on your holiday to-do list or handle some of your home tasks, such as organizing mail, doing laundry, cleaning or running errands. You might also take advantage of paid care for your loved ones, including using individual caregivers, adult day care centers or respite care programs that can free you up for holiday activities.

9. Simplify your holiday activities

Many of us love to go all-out for the holidays, but it will be less stressful if you can scale back and find a way to simplify while still enjoying the spirit of the season. You could choose just a few decorations or foods that are most significant to you and feel doable, or cut back to two or three holiday activities that fill your heart with joy. Set limits and you'll be OK.

10. Start new traditions

Instead of focusing on what you're not doing, try doing something new. If cooking holiday meals is too much for you, eat out or order a prepared meal to have at home to give you more time with family and less time cleaning up. Give the gift of time or attention rather than costly presents. Attend a holiday concert you've never gone to before. Can't make it to a holiday gathering? Use technology and have a video visit.

*Amy Goyer is a caregiving expert for AARP and the author of *Juggling Work and Caregiving*. This article was originally published on December 6, 2013*