



Self Care for the Caregiver

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When I was a caregiver, I remember how hours would turn into days, days into weeks, weeks to months, without one thought of self-care. Let me clarify: I cared about myself but it often took the form of a prayer, as in: "Please don't let me get sick, gain weight, have an undiagnosed pain because there's no time to take care of it."

I did so much running around with mom -- taking her to doctor's appointments, managing her schedule, her meds and daily care -- that I pushed my physical and emotional stuff to the side. But the thing with "stuff" is that it all has a way of coming back up and getting out in front of you.

A few years ago, I had a double bout of bronchitis that my body couldn't fight. In years before caring for my mom, when I didn't feel well or had a cold, I could just get into bed with no worries, because I knew mom was there for me if I needed her. But this was the first time I was terribly ill in this role of "caregiver" and all I could think of was, "Who takes care of the caregiver?"

All I wanted to do was rest and not have to worry about walking the dog, cooking or taking care of anything other than myself, but Alzheimer's changed the game.

When I went to the doctor, my mother was with me and she knew I wasn't feeling well. Even though she couldn't care for me like she used to, it tickled me when she'd say, "When we get home, you get some rest." Regardless of how much Alzheimer's took from her, I guess there's still some internal mothering clock that, sadly, she could no longer act on.

Being that this was the first time I was really ill, I never had to think about how I was going to care for mom *and* for myself. It was a tremendous eye opener. And in this case I didn't have the energy or fight within me, so it took longer than normal to get rid of my bronchitis.

It was during that time that I made a promise to start taking better care of myself. I could no longer just say that I cared about myself. I had to start *showing* that I cared for myself.

Attendants on an airplane will tell you to take the oxygen before you give it to someone else. I wasn't taking the oxygen that I needed to care for mom and so I began the road to my oxygen by eating more healthfully and getting back into exercising. I always wanted to be a runner and as the weather got warmer, I started making a go of it. Just taking a few moments of the day to move, to walk, to breathe, felt tremendous.

A caregiver's life is wrapped around finding the best care for their loved one when all too often they forget to find the best care for themselves. Caregiver burnout is real and stress levels become terribly high, which research is showing to be a growing concern.

I know the challenges in finding time or a piece of happiness for yourself, but you can find joy in the little things. For example, being that it's winter, while you are enjoying your favorite cup of coffee, tea or hot chocolate, make the most of the experience. Sip slowly and savor it.

If you have a home care attendant, steal those moments to walk, jog, or go for a quick fitness class. Or maybe even close the door and take a nap.

Fill up your spirit by keeping a gratitude or happiness jar. Every day, write down something you are grateful for or write down something that made you happy and put it in the jar. On New Year's Eve or at the end of the year, read what you wrote. In the midst of the Alzheimer's storm how great will it be to see the gracious and happy moments you had along the way.

The days are long, the task is not easy but yet you still stay in the fight against Alzheimer's and care for your loved ones another day. I know the role all too well and send you warm thoughts and many thanks for taking up the charge of being a love-giver.

Thank you for the many selfless hours that you give and for being the next man or only man up.

Thank you for doing the job many wouldn't do.

Thank you for loving, caring and giving without asking for anything in return.

Thank you for continuing to stay the course and for being effective through adversity.

Thank you for being an advocate, open to new resources and to the promise of hope.

Today, and each day forward, try to find the fun, the laughter and the joy of the day and, if nothing else, give yourself a hug. You deserve it.

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