

7 CARING FOR YOURSELF

Visit www.LLS.org/CaregiverWorkbook to access all chapters and worksheets.

As a caregiver you may neglect to take good care of your own needs because you are so focused on caring for your loved one. This is understandable, but to offer your loved one the best possible care, you need to be healthy and well yourself, both physically and emotionally. In the next few pages, learn strategies for taking better care of yourself while caring for a cancer patient.

Ways to Care Yourself. Caring for someone who is sick and, at the same time, worrying about what the future holds is exhausting and can quickly lead to burnout. Caregiving can be a full-time job. Often, caregivers will just keep doing what needs to be done and neglect their own well-being or feel guilty if they do take time for themselves.

Use the following strategies to make sure you don't forget to take care of yourself. Even if you only have a few minutes to spare here and there, taking that time for yourself and doing at least some of these things can still make a difference.

- Get some form of exercise like walking or take an aerobics class.
- Create a support system. Call friends or a family member when you need to talk or need help.
- Keep up with a hobby or something you enjoy doing, such as reading, painting or gardening.
- Try to stay connected with friends even if you do have to cut back on your social life.
- Try journaling to provide an outlet to express yourself so that you can process and cope with your emotions.
- Eat well-balanced meals. Caregiving can leave little time, and many people turn to fast food or junk food. Get the nutrition your body needs.
- Have a place where you can go to “escape” and just be by yourself.
- Set priorities each day and make sure the most important tasks get done, but try not to worry about items further down on your to-do list.
- Seek proper medical care for yourself as well by seeing your primary care provider (PCP). Follow any directions given by your PCP. For example, take any medications as prescribed.
- Try to cut out smoking and drinking alcohol.
- Try to get a good amount of sleep each night and find time to rest throughout the day.

Accept Help from Friends and Family Members. Learning to let go and to accept help will lower your anxiety levels and raise your spirits. People want to chip in, but they may not be sure what kinds of help you need. Keep a list of all caregiving tasks. That way, when friends or family members offer to help, you can give them specific tasks. Try using a caregiver mobile app to help you coordinate help from family and friends.

“Being a caregiver is stressful. It is a necessary thing... . To me, there is a lot of on-the-job training. There are a lot of decisions that you have to make that you wish you didn't have to make; a lot of decisions that you have to make that you are just completely unprepared for, but in order to get through it, you definitely need some down time. You need some ‘me’ time and don't feel bad about it.”

—*Kimberly, caregiver and wife of Elijah, who passed from myeloma*

Excerpt from July 2018 “No Playbook for Caregiving: Kimberly’s Story” podcast episode on *The Bloodline with LLS* (www.LLS.org/TheBloodline)



Examples of caregiving coordination apps include

- Lotsa Helping Hands: www.lotsahelpinghands.com
- Caringbridge: www.caringbridge.org
- MyLifeLine: www.mylifeline.org

TIP:

In order to care for your loved one, you have to take care of yourself too. As the saying goes, you can't pour from an empty cup.

Take a Break. If you're a full-time caregiver, you can't always take a day off, but learning techniques to alleviate stress throughout the day can be extremely helpful. Try deep-breathing techniques. Listen to relaxing music, take a short walk or call a friend. However you choose to get away during the day, you need at least 30 minutes a day to yourself.



For more information about coping strategies, visit www.LLS.org/booklets to view, print or order the free LLS booklet *Managing Stress*.

Creating a Self-Care Plan. Self-care is

- Taking action to maintain or improve your own mental, emotional and physical health, especially during times of stress
- Intentionally doing things that improve your mood and lower your stress levels.

Use the following prompts to create a self-care plan. It's easy to say you want to take more time for yourself, but it can often be hard to actually find the time to do it if you don't consciously make time or set self-care goals.

Physical Self-Care Plan. As a caregiver, if you are not physically well, you will not be able to take care of your loved one.

Check all the statements below that are true.

- I eat a well-balanced diet that includes a variety of fruits and vegetables, proteins, whole grains and healthy fats.
- I drink at least eight 8-oz glasses of water or fluid a day (an 8x8 goal).
- I sleep well each night and wake up feeling rested.
- I exercise for 30 minutes at least three times a week.
- I do not smoke or use tobacco.
- I only drink alcohol in moderation.
- I keep up with my own medical needs, such as getting an annual checkup from my primary care provider, and I get regular dental cleanings.

Did you leave any of these statements unchecked? If so, you may need to consider improving those aspects of physical self-care. Talk to your primary care provider about ways to improve your health and well-being.

What are some ways in which you can improve your physical well-being?

Example: Drink more water to stay hydrated.

Write down a few short-term goals to improve your physical well-being.

Example: I will keep a water bottle with me throughout the day to make sure I meet the 8x8 goal.

Mental and Emotional Self-Care Plan. Taking care of your mental and emotional health is just as important as caring for your physical health. It's important to take time for yourself each day and to keep up with activities that you enjoy. With the daily responsibilities of caregiving, you may forget to do these things. Make a conscious effort to take time to care for your mental and emotional health.

What activities do you enjoy? Check all that apply.

- Listening to music, playing an instrument or singing
- Reading or listening to audiobooks
- Exercising or participating in group exercise classes
- Playing sports or organized games with friends
- Hiking, fishing, or other outdoor sports
- Meditating or practicing yoga
- Painting, drawing, or other types of art making
- Journaling or creative writing
- Attending religious or spiritual services
- Activities with friends or family
- Practicing personal care, such as long baths, manicures or face masks
- Cooking or baking
- Watching movies or TV shows
- Playing video or computer games
- Puzzles
- Yard work or gardening
- Other: _____
- Other: _____

Any of these activities can be part of a self-care plan. Pick one or two of your favorite activities and make them a priority in your day-to-day life. Then fill out the following statements to create goals for emotional self-care.

I will set aside time to _____ once a day.

Examples: Drink coffee on the front porch, read a devotional, meditate and stretch, write in a journal.

I will set aside time to _____ once a week.

Examples: Get dinner with friends, attend a religious or spiritual service, go to an art or exercise class.

Change the activity and frequency to adjust to your lifestyle and needs, but do be sure to make the time for yourself.

Stay Calm Strategy. When caring for a loved one with cancer, there will be times that are difficult and emotional. It's unavoidable. Prepare for these moments by having a strategy in place to help yourself calm down if you feel anxious or overwhelmed. Having a plan in place, in advance, will help you better manage unexpected intense emotions.

Try the following strategies:

- Do a breathing exercise.
- Repeat a meaningful mantra, affirmation or prayer.
- Close your eyes and sit in silence.
- Stand up and stretch.
- Take a quick walk outside.
- Call a close friend or family member.

When I feel overwhelmed I will



City of Hope offers videos with more breathing and meditation exercises on their YouTube channel. You can visit this channel at www.youtube.com/user/cityofhopeonline and go to the playlists tab to access the “Living Well” playlist with breathing and meditation exercises.

Deep-Belly-Breathing Exercise

1. Sit in a comfortable position and close your eyes.
2. Place one hand on your stomach and your other hand on your chest.
3. Take a deep breath through your nose. The hand on your stomach should rise. The hand on your chest should not move much.
4. Exhale through your nose. The hand on your stomach should move, and the hand on your chest should not move much. Focus on your breathing and your hands.

There are a variety of breathing exercises you can find online. Try a few different ones until you find one that works for you.



The Leukemia & Lymphoma Society (LLS) offers a number of helpful resources. For more information about any of the services listed below, visit www.LLS.org or contact an LLS Information Specialist at **(800) 955-4572**.

- **Weekly Online Chat for Caregivers:** Our live, weekly online chat provides a friendly forum where you can share your experiences and chat with other caregivers. Each chat is moderated by an oncology social worker. Visit www.LLS.org/chat to learn more.
- **The Patti Robinson Kaufmann First Connection Program:** *First Connection* is a telephone support program that links you with a trained peer volunteer who has experienced a similar situation. Anyone with a blood-related cancer, as well as his or her caregiver, is eligible to receive a call. Visit www.LLS.org/FirstConnection to learn more.
- **LLS Community:** Chat with other caregivers and stay up-to-date on the latest diagnosis and treatment news. Share your experiences and get personalized support from trained LLS staff. Visit www.LLS.org/community to sign up.
- **The Family Support Groups Program:** The Leukemia & Lymphoma Society (LLS) *Family Support Groups* are open to patients, family members and caregivers. Volunteer nurses and social workers professionally lead the groups. Learn more by calling an LLS Information Specialist at **(800) 955-4572**.

You can also reach out to members of the healthcare team for local suggestions. Many hospitals and treatment centers host support groups for survivors and caregivers.

Caregivers and Depression. Feeling sad, depressed, or anxious after a loved one is diagnosed with cancer is normal. However, if these feelings start to interfere with your daily activities, you may need individual counseling from a medical professional.

Symptoms of clinical depression include

- Ongoing sadness or feelings of hopelessness
- Loss of interest or pleasure in most activities
- Major weight loss or weight gain
- Agitation or restlessness
- Fatigue or no energy
- Trouble sleeping
- Trouble focusing, remembering, or making decisions
- Feeling worthless, guilty, or helpless
- Thoughts of death or suicide.

Don't be afraid to seek help. For a referral to a mental health professional, reach out to the members of the healthcare team, visit your own doctor or call your insurance provider for recommendations.

“I love the caregiver chats. I never miss it ever. Everything else is scheduled around that. The chats are 100 percent helpful and wonderful.”

— Donna, caregiver and wife of Pete, acute promyelocytic leukemia (APL) survivor, talking about the weekly LLS online chat (www.LLS.org/chat)

Excerpt from November 2017 “Processing Our New Plan: Pete and Donna’s Story” podcast episode on *The Bloodline with LLS* (www.LLS.org/TheBloodline)

