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Taking Care of Your Own Needs and Feelings

You need to be at your best if you are to provide the best care. Therefore, pay attention to your own needs as well as those of the person you are helping. Set limits on what you can reasonably expect yourself to do. Take time off to care for yourself, and ask for help before stress builds.

It is natural to have strong feelings when you are helping someone with a serious illness. Some common feelings that caregivers have as well as strategies for dealing with them if they become severe are:

Feeling overwhelmed

Caregivers as well as the person being cared for can feel overwhelmed and confused when they learn that the disease is not responding to treatment or is progressing. Here are some ways to deal with feeling overwhelmed:

- ❑ Try not to make important decisions while you are upset. Sometimes, you must make decisions immediately, but you often do not have to. Ask the doctor, nurse, or social worker how long before a decision needs to be made.
- ❑ Take time to sort things out.
- ❑ Talk over important problems with others who are feeling more level-headed and rational. If you are feeling very upset or discouraged, ask a friend, neighbor, or family member to help. They can bring a calmer perspective to the situation as well as new ideas, and they can help you in dealing with the problems that you face.

Anger

There are plenty of reasons for you to become angry while caring for a person with advanced cancer. For example, the person you are caring for may be demanding or

irritating at times. Friends, family members, or professionals may not be as helpful or understanding as you would like. Some people grow angry because they feel their religion has let them down. It is natural to be angry when your life has been turned inside out, which often happens with a serious illness like cancer.

These feelings are normal. What is important is what you do with them, not that you feel them in the first place. The best way to deal with angry feelings is to recognize them, accept them, and find some way to express them appropriately. If you do not deal with your anger, it can get in the way of almost everything you do.

Here are some ways to deal with your anger:

- ❑ Try to see the situation from the other person's point of view, and understand why he or she acted that way.
- ❑ Recognize that other people are under stress as well, and that some people deal with stressful situations better than others.
- ❑ Express your anger in an appropriate way before it becomes too severe. If you wait until your anger is severe, it will impair your judgment, and you are likely to make other people angry in return.
- ❑ Get away from the situation for awhile. Try to cool off before you go back and deal with what made you angry.
- ❑ Find safe ways to express your anger. This can include beating on a pillow, yelling out loud in a car or closed room, or doing some hard and vigorous exercise. Sometimes, it helps to vent anger with someone who is "safe" - someone who will not be offended or strike back, like a friend or member of the clergy.
- ❑ Talk to someone about why you feel angry.
- ❑ Explaining to another person why you feel angry often helps you to understand why you reacted as you did, allowing you to see your reactions in perspective.

Fear

You may become afraid when someone you care for deeply has a serious illness. You do not know what is in store for this person or for yourself, and you may fear that you will not be able to handle what happens.

Here are some ways to deal with your fears:

- ❑ Learn as much as possible about what is happening and what may happen in the future. Knowledge can help to reduce fear of the unknown, and it can help you to be realistic so that you can prepare for the future. Talk with health professionals and other people who have cared for someone with cancer to see if you are exaggerating the risks.
- ❑ Talk with someone about your fears. It often helps to explain to an understanding person why you feel afraid. This allows you to think through the reasons for your feelings. Also, talking with an understanding person will show you that other people realize and appreciate how you feel.

Loss and sorrow

A serious, life-threatening illness can bring on a great sense of loss and sorrow. You may feel sad that plans you had for the future might not be fulfilled. You may feel the loss of the "normal" person and the "normal" things you did together before the illness. Memories of how he or she used to be may make you sad, and you may feel burdened by more responsibilities that you must handle alone.

Here is a way to deal with feelings of loss and sorrow:

- ❑ Talk about your feelings of loss with other people who have had similar experiences. People who have been caregivers for persons with a serious illness usually will understand how you feel. Support groups are one way to find people with similar experiences.

Guilt

Many people who care for someone with advanced cancer feel guilt at some time during the illness. They may believe they did something to cause the cancer or that they should have recognized the disease sooner. They may feel guilt about not doing a better job of caring for the person with cancer or because they are angry or upset with him or her. They also may feel guilt because they are well and a person they care for deeply is sick. Some people even feel guilt almost out of habit, having learned from childhood to feel that way whenever something goes wrong.

Although feelings of guilt are understandable, they can interfere with doing the best possible job of caregiving. Guilt makes you think only about what you did wrong. Most problems have many causes, and what you did most likely is only part of the reason (assuming it even has anything to do with the problem at all). To solve a problem, you must look objectively at all of the causes and then develop a plan to deal with the entire situation. For example, if you feel anger toward the person you are caring for, this is partly because of what he or she did as well as what you did. To deal with the cause of

that anger, you need to talk openly with the person you are caring for about what both of you did - not just feel guilt about what you did or feeling angry.

Your goal here is to work toward forgiveness, both for yourself and for the other person. Dwelling on feelings of guilt about the past will rob you of the precious energy you need to cope with the present.

Here are some ways to deal with feelings of guilt:

- ❑ Do not expect yourself to be perfect. Remember that you are human and will make mistakes from time to time.
- ❑ Do not dwell on mistakes. Accept your mistakes, and get beyond them as best you can. Repetitive, negative thoughts such as guilt can be controlled by pushing them aside with positive, constructive thoughts.

Source: American College of Physicians