

The Ups and Downs of Caregiving

How to cope with common caregiver emotions.

Which of the following statements ring true for you as a caregiver?

- a. Some days are better than others.
- b. I know my role is valuable, but it can be frustrating at times.
- c. I sometimes feel guilty for having negative emotions about my caregiving role.
- d. All of the above.

If you chose option “d”, you’re not alone. As rewarding as the caregiving role can be, it’s also a tremendous responsibility that comes with highs and lows. The highs can be energizing; the lows can be exhausting. Sometimes it’s easier to bury or dismiss those negative emotions, but it’s important for caregivers to remember that negative thoughts and feelings are normal, valid and important — and need to be dealt with. When you ignore negative emotions, it can lead to problems with sleep, substance abuse, overeating and even illness, all of which can make caregiving feel harder and less enjoyable.

The Family Caregiver Alliance (FCA) encourages caregivers to express and deal with all of their emotions. Of course, that’s easier said than done. It can be difficult to prioritize your own emotions when you’re working hard to take care of someone else. Still, coping with your feelings is important.

You can be proactive about staying on a healthy emotional path by anticipating some of the emotions common to caregivers. While the range of emotions and the ways people experience them can vary, here are a few that the FCA lists among the most common, along with suggested coping mechanisms.

Pay attention to these and other emotions, and you may be in a much better position to take care of yourself — and therefore experience more fulfillment and joy in your incredibly important role as a caregiver!



Emotion

Anger

Helping someone on an ongoing basis can be hard, especially if your care recipient is not appreciative or even accepting of the aid you provide. Maintaining control of your emotions can be nearly impossible. Flare ups and feeling like you're on your last nerve is often part of the territory.

Depression

Feelings of hopelessness or helplessness, the inability to experience joy, trouble sleeping, anxiety... all are symptoms of depression. Caregivers are an at-risk group for depression, so stay mindful about how you're feeling day-to-day.

Fear

The worst-case scenarios and "what ifs" that come with being responsible for another person's health and well-being can provoke anxiety and downright fear when they start consuming your thoughts.

Guilt

Caregiver guilt is common because of the "shoulds" we inflict on ourselves: We should be doing a better job; we should always love being a caregiver; we should never be impatient or irritable with our care recipient. And on and on...

Coping Strategy

Forgive yourself. "Find constructive ways to express yourself, learn to walk away and give yourself a 'time out,'" advises the FCA. It's also healthy to find supportive people who will allow you to vent about what's triggering your feelings of anger.

Try not to ignore symptoms of depression. This mood disorder needs to be taken seriously. Make an appointment to see your doctor or a mental health professional as soon as you can to develop a plan for dealing with depression, which may include exercise, therapy and medication.

The FCA recommends having contingency plans in place to lower your anxiety. For example, if you're worried about what would happen if you have a personal emergency, ask a friend to be your back-up 'on call' caregiver. Also, be sure to talk to someone you trust who can offer you a calming perspective on the things that are frightening you.

Forgive yourself and set realistic standards for yourself. Perfection is not the goal. Be proud of yourself for wanting to be an excellent caregiver — and at the same time, give yourself some slack when excellence doesn't happen.

Emotion

Coping Strategy

Jealousy

It's human nature to look around and feel resentment and envy at people's circumstances. Caregivers in particular might be jealous of friends who have more daily freedom, or of siblings who live far away and therefore can't be a part of caregiving responsibilities.

Jealousy happens. Acknowledge and process your feelings. Just try to avoid wallowing in jealous thoughts. Instead, try to focus on what you do have. It can sound cliché, but being grateful for what you have can help turn around feelings of envy or lack.

The emotions that come up during caregiving can feel intense and overwhelming at times, but you're not alone. Look into the coping mechanisms listed and reach out for support when you need to. For a lengthier list of possible emotions and helpful coping mechanisms, visit the fact sheet available at the FCA website.

Sources:

The emotional side of caregiving

<https://www.caregiver.org/pilotIntegration/indexPersistent.html?uri=%2Femotional-side-caregiving>

Depression (major depressive disorder) overview

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/depression/symptoms-causes/syc-20356007>

In praise of gratitude

<https://www.health.harvard.edu/mind-and-mood/in-praise-of-gratitude>

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