

## Caregiver Burnout: How to Avoid It if You're Caring for a Spouse

3 Practical Tips for Spousal Caregivers



We've all started DIY home projects that spiral into disasters. You think, "Why should I pay someone for help when I can handle it myself?" Then things don't go as planned. It ends up taking more time, money, and patience than you'd hoped for—all because you didn't get help.

If you're caring for your spouse or loved one, you might have a DIY mindset but you're experiencing burnout. Below are three effective ways to cope with the stress of caregiving, and turn a daunting task into a manageable one:

### What We'll Cover

- How to avoid isolation
- How to get help with the jobs of caregiving
- How to get relief with respite care

### First, How to Avoid Isolation

Many dedicated caregivers focus so much on caring for their spouses they neglect caring for themselves. As a result, they spend less time engaging with friends and family, and they become more socially isolated.

Avoid isolation using these ideas:

#### ■ Connect with others who are caring for a spouse

Find and connect with other spousal caregivers. They may have similar challenges and you can provide emotional and social support to each other.

### Spousal Caregivers Tend to Do It All Themselves



**66%** of spousal caregivers provide care without any unpaid or paid help

### ■ Join a support group—online or in-person

A support group can provide validation and encouragement, as well as problem-solving strategies for difficult situations. People in support groups understand what you're going through. These groups can also be a good place to create meaningful friendships. More than a quarter of caregivers seek support on an online forum right after they begin caring for their loved ones. By the end of their first year of caregiving, nearly half of them have turned to an online community for assistance. Below are some sites that provide information about support groups, in-person and online.

### ■ In-person support groups:

Well Spouse Association is a national organization made up of spousal caregivers coping with a broad range of medical conditions

Eldercare.gov offers resources for free caregiver counseling and support groups

### ■ Online support groups:

AgingCare.com has a section on their site where you can connect with elder-care experts and family caregivers

Caring.com offers caregiving tips, advice, and support

Family Caregiver Alliance Caregivers can share, interact, and learn from each other

### ■ Find new friends

Take time to go places or do things you enjoy. If you like to read, consider joining a book club. You could also join a gym or take a fitness or sports class: golf, tennis, tai chi. The more it involves contact with other people, the better. Meetup.com can help connect you with people in your area who have similar interests.



Spousal caregivers spend  
**36 hours**  
per week  
providing care

Source: Caregiving in the US: 2020 Report, The National Alliance for Caregiving and the AARP Public Policy Institute, 2020. Most recent data available.

## Second, How to Get Help With the Jobs of Caregiving

Let's face it, it's not easy to ask for help. Many spousal caregivers are reluctant to ask family and friends for help because they don't want to inconvenience them. Caregivers also tend to give others the impression that they're doing fine, masking the need for help. Usually family and friends are willing to help but don't realize you need it. Be honest with yourself. If you need help, ask family and friends for it clearly and directly, or consider hiring professional help.

### ■ Tips to get help from family and friends

Caring for an aging adult is more effective using a team approach. Try these tips to get help from family or friends:

- Start with a one-on-one conversation
- Be specific about tasks they need help with
- Make sure the person understands what would be most helpful for both you and the caregiving recipient
- Ask the person if they'd like to help, and if so, in what way

For additional tips to request help from family, check out the DailyCaring article "4 Ways To Get Family To Help With Aging Parents."

### ■ Get help from paid support

Spousal caregivers tend to feel less comfortable hiring professionals to provide care for their loved ones. Common concerns about professional caregivers include:

- They won't care about their loved one
- They might steal
- They aren't affordable
- Many caregiving spouses feel they should manage things on their own

If you can afford it, consider hiring an aide to help with cleaning the house, cooking meals, running errands, or providing nursing services—whatever will lighten your workload.

You can also consider hiring a geriatric care manager who can assist you with making financial decisions, managing medical needs, housing, and ensuring the safety of your loved one.

### Third, How to Get Relief With Respite Care

From time to time, we all need a break from the daily grind, especially if you're caring for a spouse. Most spousal caregivers spend an average of 45 hours a week providing care.<sup>1</sup> Respite care simply means someone else takes care of your spouse, while you take time for yourself. Unfortunately, many caregivers don't take advantage of this service. Sixty-six percent of the spousal caregivers surveyed get no outside help at all from family, friends, or home health aides.<sup>2</sup>

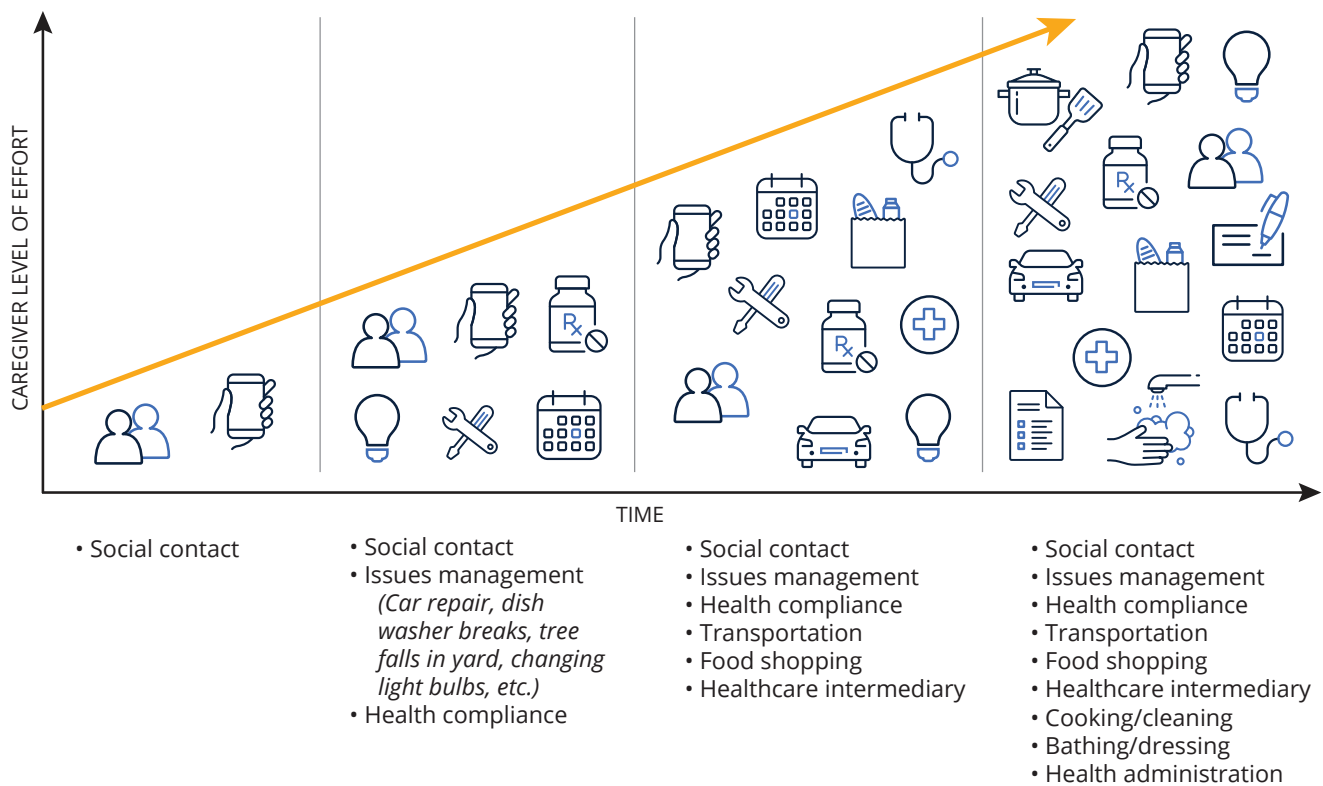
Respite care can be provided at home by a friend, another family member, a volunteer, or by paid services in a care setting, such as adult daycare or a residential facility.

Spousal caregivers come up with lots of reasons to resist the idea of respite care, including guilt, money, busy schedules, and reluctance to change their loved one's routine, which increases the likelihood of burnout.

### Caregiving Gets More Complex Over Time: Four Levels of Caregiving

At first, caregiving may look like periodic, simple phone calls or check-ins to maintain social contact. Over time, other tasks may emerge, such as providing transportation to the doctor's office or routine home maintenance to change a light bulb. In many instances, a caregiver may serve as a healthcare advocate or

intermediary, speaking with physicians, pharmacists, and others. As new tasks are added and existing activities remain, the demand of the caregiver's time, effort, and capacity increases to include a growing and diverse array of activities.



Source: MIT AgeLab, 2017

If you're resistant to the idea of respite care, consider that:

- Respite is good for you and your loved one
- Being too busy to track down a respite care provider is a sign that you need a break
- A break now can ward off burnout later
- Respite care is often covered by insurance or an agency such as the Department of Veterans Affairs or Medicare

Here are some resources to help you find respite options in your area:

- Care.com
- National Association of Area Agencies on Aging
- Department of Veterans Affairs
- ARCH National Respite Network and Resource Center's National Respite Locator

## You Might Still Be Thinking, "What's Wrong with Doing Everything Myself?"

Do-it-yourself caregiving for your spouse might work for a while, but as the years go by, caregiving gets more complex. Research from the MIT AgeLab, reveals that over time, the demands of providing care are likely to increase in their diversity and intensity, placing a commensurate increase of physical and emotional burden on the caregiver. So even if you're currently doing all the caregiving yourself, you could put yourself at risk of burnout, which isn't good for you or your spouse.

## Remember Three Things to Avoid Burnout

First, avoid becoming isolated. Connect with other caregivers, join a support group, or go places where you can meet new friends. Second, don't do all the caregiving yourself. Get help from friends or family. Third, use respite care to get a break. You need some time for yourself.

## Get Caregiving Done with a Team

The bottom line is that you can't care well for others if you don't care for yourself. Like DIY home projects, caregiving can get more complex and stressful than you expected. Try some of the ideas provided to build a team to get the help you need.

## Next Steps

1. Do a quick self-assessment. Are you sending a message to others that everything's fine and you don't need any help?
2. Get some help from family and friends
3. Join a caregivers support group locally or online to connect with others who are going through similar experiences

Sources:

<sup>1</sup> The emotional lives of caregivers, American Psychological Association, July/August 2019. Most recent data available.

<sup>2</sup> About Spousal Caregiving, Well Spouse Association, 2024

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