There are two realities when it comes to caregiving for someone with Alzheimer’s disease or another illness. One is that this role can be a rewarding, life-changing experience for the caregiver and can make a world of difference to the person who is ill. The other is that every caregiver is a candidate for burnout, and some feel it more severely than others.

As difficult as it may be to believe, and given everything that caregivers deal with, it is important to mention and appreciate that most caregivers appear to cope well with stress and may not experience dramatic changes in their lives. Their sense of satisfaction from caregiving balances the everyday stresses. If the caregiver experiences more satisfaction than stress, he or she will be in a “healthy” caregiver situation and should not be at a high risk for burnout.

The key to recognizing susceptibility to burnout is an understanding of the sources of caregiver satisfaction. Caregiving can be a valuable and rewarding experience when you decide upfront to care with an open heart for the duration, as well as prioritize your own sanity and self care. A sense of obligation and doing the right thing may initially be the reasons to assume the role of caregiver, but when love for the person with Alzheimer’s disease and the positive aspects of caregiving override.
everyday chores and mundane tasks, both the caregiver and the care recipient benefit.

It is when a caregiver loses his or her sense of personal fulfillment and sense of self that a higher risk of burnout exists because he or she views the caregiving role as duty, obligation and chore only.

One of the most common causes of burnout is the way roles shift in the relationship when one party becomes a caregiver. A spouse, adult sibling or adult child often feels as if his or her primary role as spouse, sibling or child, respectively, gives way to a “parenting” role. Responsibilities shift and familiar interactions change as the person reluctantly assumes a new role, often without mourning the loss of the former one. What had been relied upon, looked forward to and taken for granted no longer exists, replaced often by something unwanted, unfamiliar and resistant.

Likewise, unknown or unrealistic expectations can contribute to burnout. Caregivers often feel a lack of control over the outcome of the illness or the person’s behavior, and live with that fear of the unknown on a daily basis. For many people caring for someone with Alzheimer’s disease, practical concerns such as dealing with job insecurity, financial strains, insurance company frustrations, and emotional issues such as loneliness and weakened family support systems also come into play.

Often caregivers feel as if they are falling down the rabbit hole without any sense of direction or goals. This worsens a feeling of isolation that occurs when traditional support systems—friends and family—fall by the wayside. Burnout may intensify when there appears to be no one who understands what you are going through or who will support you in ways that are helpful to you. This sense of isolation reinforces the conviction, “I’m alone and nobody can help,” and “What can they do, anyway?”

If you can stay balanced and give to yourself while caregiving to another, you will be less likely to experience extreme burnout. Here are some things to keep in mind to help maintain your balance:

**Learn about Alzheimer’s Disease.** The more you know about Alzheimer’s disease and caregiving skills, the more confident and effective you will be in handling certain situations. While you cannot cure your loved one, you can help provide an environment that is familiar, safe and loving. Developing patience and a different type of communication style are essential. There will be times when a conversation with a person with Alzheimer’s disease doesn’t make sense, and his or her thoughts may even be delusional. Communicate directly and calmly to the person’s soul, instead.

**Live in the Moment.** Stay in the moment and have hope. Appreciate where you are at this time. By being in each moment, a caregiver can navigate through even the toughest situations. Both a caregiver and care recipient can experience joy in the simplest things, and the focus should be on what is real, essential and important to each.

**Set Goals and Have a Plan.** Losing the capacity to care is a direct result of caregiver burnout. Being prepared is the best defense. Having a plan that you can rely on helps to fend off or effectively deal with the frustration, depression and sense of hopelessness that is typical of burnout. Talk to family members, friends and professionals about day-to-day, hands-on care, changes in medical and behavioral issues, and long-term care concerns such as palliative care, living wills and insurance. Share as many of these responsibilities as possible.

**Develop Strategies for Coping.** Review the strategies you have used before in other situations and assess their value to you now. If taking drugs, drinking or wallowing in self-pity have been your “way to deal” in the past, now is the time to become a student of alternative ways to deal with stress. For example, even though some days will be better than others, focus daily on some positive thing—or better yet, things—that you have learned or experienced.
Keep Roles in Perspective. As a caregiver for a parent, it is wise to recognize that your roles do not reverse. Your parent remains your parent, and, like all people, deserves to be treated with respect, even if you are in charge of feeding or bathing him or her.

Concentrate on Your Own Health. Eat healthfully, exercise daily, meditate or do a relaxation exercise that reminds you to incorporate “mindful, restorative breathing” throughout the day, and sleep soundly. Journaling your thoughts and feelings on a regular basis helps to relieve stress and keep you in balance.

Join a Support Group. You can be emotionally helped and you can be helpful by participating in a support group with people in a similar situation. If you are a spouse, try to find a group of other spouses. If you are a daughter, find a group with other adult children.

Be Grateful. Before you get out of bed, count at least three things for which you are grateful. Sometimes when caregiving for someone who has Alzheimer’s disease, you only focus on what you no longer have, rather than that what you do have. Caring for someone and keeping burnout at bay is very much about attitude.

Greet Each Day as if it is the First Day of the Rest of Your Life. Plan each day with a belief that what must be done will get done—and don’t have a long list of what must get done. In caring for someone with Alzheimer’s disease, everyday life will move at a slower pace. This means that it takes longer to do things, to go places, to do anything, really. Plan some fun activities or change the daily routine without throwing a monkey wrench into your loved one’s schedule. They may be simple, but simple pleasures are worth so much when you are a caregiver.

### Signs of Burnout

Changes in your body, mood and lifestyle should ring an alarm: possible caregiver burnout.

But not always. It’s important, as hard as it might be sometimes due to multiple variables in your life, to try to differentiate whether the changes in your “normal” life stem from stress associated with your caregiving situation or from unrelated circumstances.

The list below provides a starting point to help make a determination. You could be suffering from burnout when you experience several of these signs, especially more than one in a category.

- **Physical** - Headaches, stomachaches, backaches, flare-ups in any part of your body that hurt in the past, persistent fatigue, sleep problems, stopping an exercise program, appetite changes, weight gain or loss
- **Emotional** - Depression, fantasy, anxiety, listlessness, anger, numb or explosive responses, hopelessness, loss of the ability to be caring, a sense of inadequacy in caring for your loved one, feeling low self esteem, withdrawal, worry about dying, an increase in drug, alcohol, caffeine and tobacco use and/or use of prescription drugs to treat depression or sleeping difficulties
- **Mental** - Feeling dull, bored and somewhat lifeless, changes in memory or the ability to concentrate on a task or conversation, excessive worrying or preoccupation about the future, disinterest in activities you usually enjoy
- **Social** - Declining social invitations, withdrawal from friends, family and society, reduced self-care (bathing, hair, general appearance), loss of humor
- **Leisure** - Reducing or stopping activities that bring you joy, such as going to church, participating in community service, exercising, listening to music, spending time in nature, pursuing hobbies, playing with pets, being with children
favorite magazine. Don’t lose touch with the hobbies and activities that bring you joy. You are giving in so many ways every day, so find ways to enjoy this experience and life in general. Smile and laugh whenever you can.

**Learn about You.** Use the caregiver experience to learn about yourself. Begin to appreciate that what is different is not necessarily bad. Try to reinterpret the meaning of your loved one’s illness. What can you learn from the long silences, the repetition, the routine? How will this experience enrich your life and bring you gratification? Can you find joy in the simple things and small accomplishments? How does your faith come into play?

Most of all, remember that even the most loving and giving person will experience some level of fatigue and will need to take a break. Feelings of being overwhelmed and stressed can overtake the best of us. When this occurs, think of it as a positive wake up call to change gears—even if only for a brief time.

When the urge hits you to be in a different environment, gain a new perspective or have time for yourself, take steps to care for yourself without guilt. Respite is especially important in strenuous situations—such as if your loved one exhibits erratic behavior, complicated financial issues occur or personal problems unrelated to the caregiving relationship arise. You must learn how to pace yourself, take a step back and find other people to whom you can delegate some responsibilities.

By self-nurturing and periodically recharging your batteries, you are less susceptible to burnout and can balance your roles as caregiver—and individual.

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**Give Yourself a Break.** Everyone needs some time off. Although caregiving for someone with Alzheimer’s disease is 24/7, it does not have to be an around-the-clock responsibility for you alone. Find people in your family or community—respite care—who will relieve you so you can take a break. Get backup support and delegate tasks to others or share specific activities to lighten your load.

**Do Something for You.** Carve out time for you each and every day, even if only for a few minutes: Take extra time to arrange flowers in a vase; listen to music that makes you feel happy or inspired; have a cup of tea; watch birds at the feeder; or read your