

Burnout Can Happen to Anyone

Take the Quiz to see if your Caregiver Flame is about to Fizzle

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Caregiving is difficult and exhausting work. If you don't take time to set limits on what you can do and when, and create balance in your life, you may begin to suffer from a condition called "burnout." When it comes to caring for an aging loved one, some people cope better than others. But everyone's flame is at risk for flickering out if they aren't careful.

Ayala Pines and Elliot Aronson, who have made it their life's work studying burnout, defined it as "... a state of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion caused by long-term involvement in emotionally demanding situations." Since then, Pines elegantly simplified the definition. "Burnout," she wrote, "is a state where highly committed individuals lose their spirit." We're not talking about just a little stress here—burnout occurs when caregiving no longer feels meaningful because the caregiver is on emotional overload and completely exhausted!

Symptoms of stress

Symptoms of chronic stress associated with burnout often show up in a number of ways.

Physical symptoms can include:

- Fatigue
- Headaches
- Sleep problems
- High blood pressure
- Increased pain (especially in the neck and back)
- A worsening of already existing medical problems

Victims of burnout often feel:

- Depressed
- Isolated
- Disappointed with themselves
- Hopeless
- Helpless
- Angry
- Frustrated
- Trapped

Emotions like these are considered normal and are expected at various times throughout a caregiver's journey. It's a problem when crushing, negative emotions persist relentlessly, day after day. People who are burned out often project a negative attitude and express cynicism about everything. If these feelings persist, they can easily develop into a serious problem.

Enthusiasts take note

Unfortunately, those most prone to burnout are those who start out very idealistically. They have great intentions about what they can accomplish and want to give it their all. These caregivers believe in their work and feel they can make a difference. However, when things don't go smoothly or as planned, the caregiver takes responsibility, becomes overwhelmed and feels like a complete failure. When this happens, caregiving no longer seems meaningful; it has morphed into an unstoppable headache!

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Take the Burnout Quiz

If you feel overwhelmed and unable to take another step forward you may be experiencing burnout. Take the burnout quiz to find out if your flame is about to fizzle.

Are you burned out from caregiving?	True, this describes my situation most of the time.	False, this really isn't the case in my situation.
1. I feel emotionally drained because of my caregiving duties.		
2. I've developed a negative attitude.		
3. I feel stressed out more often than not.		
4. I have more medical problems as a result of being a caregiver.		
5. I feel more depressed and/or anxious than before I became a caregiver.		
6. I'm not successful as a caregiver.		
7. I have trouble sleeping at night.		
8. I feel all alone—no one helps me.		
9. I have trouble making time for myself and taking a break.		
10. I feel trapped in my caregiver role.		
11. I feel hopeless and as if there is no help for my situation.		
12. I've become angry & frustrated and sometimes take my anger & frustration out on the person I care for.		

Where Do You Stand?

The more items you answered "TRUE" to in the Burnout Quiz, the higher the likelihood that you are experiencing burnout! Even if you responded "TRUE" to just one question, you will benefit from additional help in your caretaking responsibilities.

Red alert

Feeling angry and frustrated during the course of caregiving is normal. All caregivers do at some point along the way. After all, this is a big job full of unexpected potholes. However, taking out your frustrations on the person who is ill or disabled indicates a danger signal and requires immediate action and help from a professional!

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Coping with stress

There are many ways to deal with burnout. One obvious way is ignoring your tell-tale physical and emotional symptoms. The other is quitting your job as caretaker. However, there are other, healthier options for coping with stress and turning the problem into a challenge and a catalyst for personal growth and change. How? The following strategies can help overwhelmed caregivers get back on track:

- **Acknowledge the problem** – What is not working, what is difficult, how are your feelings and health suffering?
- **Take responsibility for doing something about the problem** – Be part of the solution; use your personal wisdom and power to make things better for yourself and others. Consult with an Aging Life Care Professional™ who has endless ideas that can help. Turn to a local senior center or trusted counselor for support.
- **Examine what can and cannot be changed in the situation** – Be honest. Where can you give up some of your caretaking duties to others? What can you stop doing with no negative consequences?
- **Channel your efforts to those things that can be changed** – Find help from paid care providers, ask for more support at home from your family, involve your siblings in caring for your parents, and take some days off.
- **Develop new tools for coping** – Talk to others, join a support group, read some good books and magazine articles, and explore the Web for useful information on caregiving, self-care and burnout. Reach out and find ways to make your caretaking experience more positive.
- **Dust off the old tools you haven't used in a while** – What ways have you coped before? What helps you ride out demanding circumstances? What eases your emotional stress and helps you relax?

If you can't shake these feelings on your own, consider seeking help from a professional who can help you get back on track.

Avoiding burnout

Frank Ostaseski of the Alaya Institute is well known in the hospice and palliative care field. His words for caregivers are inspirational:

"... find a place to rest in the middle of things ... We often think of rest as something that will come when everything else is complete, like when we go on a holiday or when our work is done. We imagine that we can only find rest by changing the conditions of our life. But it is possible to discover rest right in the middle of chaos. It is experienced when we bring our full attention, without distraction to this moment, to this activity. This place of rest is always available. We need only turn toward it."

Making time to take care of yourself is often easier said than done. According to a National Alliance for Caregiving & AARP 2004 study, 51 percent of caregivers report they have less time for families and friends because of their role. And 44 percent of caregivers give up vacations, hobbies and social activities. In fact, a common caregiver refrain is, "I just don't have time to take a break!"

However, failing to take time off is a perilous form of self-neglect! Ignoring your need to rest can lead to burnout, compromised health and result in poor caregiving.

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Relief, love and support have many faces

Talk to someone about your feelings and experiences while caregiving. There are people a phone call away who will understand. An expert like an Aging Life Care Professional who has both compassion and years of experience can help you develop a workable self-care plan and find the support you need. Find your very own Aging Life Care expert at aginglifecare.org.

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