

the caregiver's
little guide to survival

7 fail-safe tips for caregivers

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7 Fail-Safe Tips for Caregivers



Susanne White

Caregiver Warrior

If you are reading this you are probably a caregiver warrior looking for relief. Being the caregiver for my parents and family, I most certainly know and understand how complicated and challenging the role of caregiver can be.

So often I felt as though I had nowhere to turn and felt helpless and lost.

I realized as I gained knowledge and experience that I could share what I learned and ways that I coped with other caregivers so they may know they are not alone in their struggle.

I designed this little booklet to give you strength, hope and knowledge for those days when you feel stressed or that you can't go on or just as a friendly reminder that there are steps to be taken and hope in those actions. May it help guide you to the self care and love so crucial to being a Caregiver Warrior.

Take care and much love always,
Susanne White
Caregiver Warrior



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Tip #1:

Let Yourself Adjust to the Caregiving Role

Jumping in and taking care of my parents was really not at the top of my mind right before my caregiving journey began. I was aware, of course, that my parents were slowing down and my mom's memory was beginning to fail, but I felt that there was no immediate cause for alarm.

They insisted they were fine, so we figured any issues would be addressed down the road.

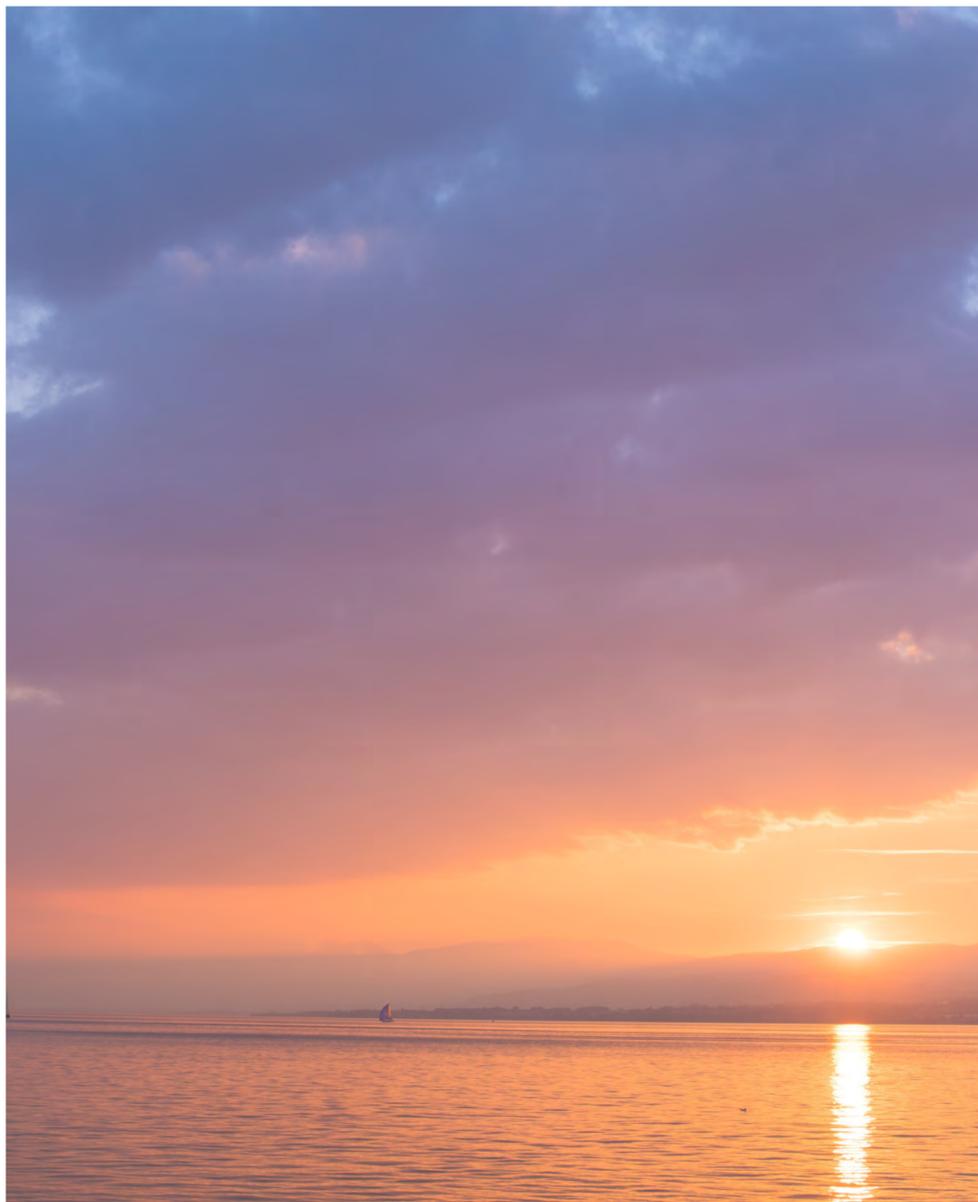
When my Dad suddenly got pneumonia from pure exhaustion (and probably an indication of heart issues that would follow later) and it became obvious that he really needed help caring for my Mom, I was surprised but jumped right in. His health was in jeopardy and my Mom was exhibiting more serious signs of dementia. So there I was: willing and able, but not prepared for this journey of a lifetime.

Adjusting to the caregiving role is a slow and sometimes scary process. I had to constantly remind myself that it was progress, not perfection. I wanted to do it all immediately and do it all perfectly. As we all know, none of us are perfect, but in a situation like this when it feels like there is so much at stake and everything seems so important, I really tried to overcompensate. Little did I know, I was headed for early burn out.

I had to slow down, do the best I could on a daily basis, and take it one day at a time.

There are so many moving parts to the caregiving experience, and adjusting to all the details, doctors, prescriptions, housing, insurance, psychological and physical issues takes time and extraordinary patience; patience not only for those around us, but also for ourselves.

Surviving the caregiving journey with the least amount of stress and most amount of joy depends on our ability to take it slow, and give ourselves and our loved ones a break. Take the time to adjust calmly. Get lots of support, and be as kind to yourself as you are to those you care for.



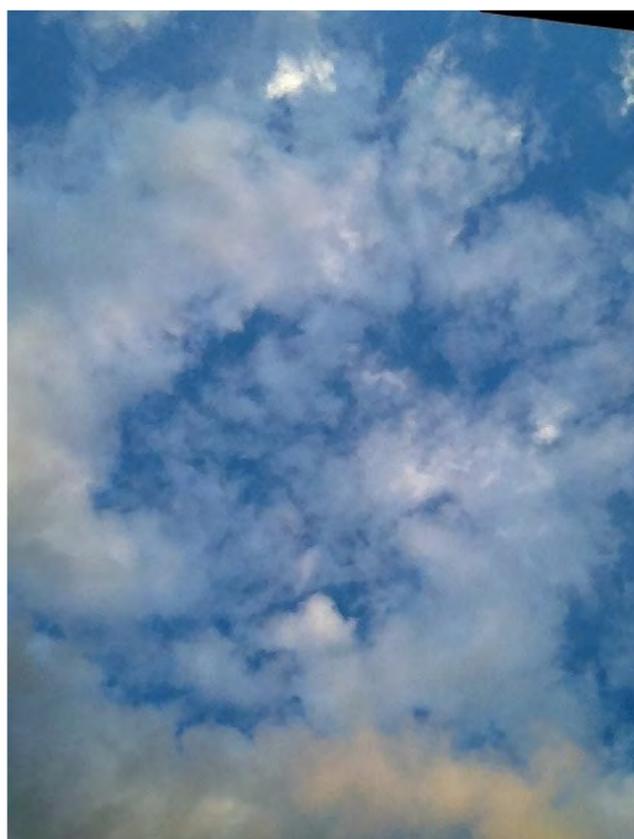
Tip #2: Take Care of Yourself!

My caregiving journey began with a bang one holiday season when my family was gathered for our annual get-together in Florida. My Dad, a WWII bombardier hero, had to be taken off the airplane in a wheelchair because he had gotten so sick during the flight. We later found out my rock-steady, never-sick Dad had walking pneumonia.

My sister and I were shocked and dismayed. I soon realized that my mom had started showing signs of dementia, and my dad was exhausted because he was caring and compensating for her.

I took my Dad aside and asked if he wanted my help. His response was an immediate yes. I committed right then and there to do whatever it took to step in and help them.

I had no idea what I was signing up for and absolutely no clue where to begin.



My caregiving journey would end up being a roller coaster of a ride. By the grace of God, I realized early on that I could be miserable or I could view my journey as a life changing and empowering one; I could choose how I felt about my caregiving role and what kind of ride I would have.

I learned the hard way that the only way I would survive this journey with grace and enjoy the ride was if I took care of myself with the same commitment that I took care of my parents.

I often say that those of us who commit to caregiving are in it for the long haul. We don't give in and we don't give up. We are hardwired to take this responsibility very seriously and will do everything we can to ensure that our loved ones are comfortable and safe.

We must be as committed to our own well being and health as we are to the well being of our loved ones. Only then will we be able to have moments where we enjoy the powerful and intense caregiving journey. It is by honoring ourselves and taking the same loving care of our own needs first that we are able to be great caregivers to others.

Self care can mean many things at many times, but by making a habit of checking in with ourselves on a daily basis to see if we need anything is the best caregiving tool we have. Treat yourself as kindly as you would your loved ones. Everyone will benefit and your journey will be one to remember.

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Tip #3: Ask for Help!

It's safe to say that most caregivers are extremely capable and caring individuals with a great sense of responsibility. We sign up for the caregiver role pledging to do everything we can to keep those in our care safe, comfortable, and happy.

Given our drive and sense of responsibility, we often feel as though we should be able to handle anything that comes our way all by ourselves; we do it, it's what we signed up for, and it's our job to soldier on no matter what.

Some of us even feel like there is something wrong with us if we have to reach out and ask for help.

Although it's understandable that we might feel this way, nothing can be further from the truth. Caregiving takes a village. Trying to do all of it alone is overwhelming and exhausting, and we can begin to feel crazy and emotionally bankrupt. This is a breeding ground for bad decisions, isolation, and loneliness. It's crazy making.

Reaching out and asking for help is one of the most important things caregivers can do for themselves and those they care for.

Reaching out and asking for help is one of the most important things caregivers can do for themselves and those they care for. Most of us are surrounded by family and friends that would gladly pitch in and help, but they often don't know what we need or how to offer.

Sometimes all we need is someone to talk to. There is nothing like a supportive, good listener to soothe the soul.

If family and friends aren't available, there are wonderful organizations, church groups, and senior support institutions that offer valuable support programs.

There is always help and relief available. Give yourself permission to speak up, reach out, and ask for help. Even if you just put someone on notice that you may be needing them in the future, you are taking an important step towards the type of self care necessary to survive the caregiving journey. Asking for help saved my life. Let it save yours.



Tip #4: Be Compassionate

The caregiver compassion I want to talk about is not the compassion we must have for those in our care.

Although compassion is such a necessary requirement for our caregiving journey, the one person we must work endlessly to have compassion for is ourselves.

Most caregivers I know are selfless and committed to helping others at all costs. We take this responsibility very seriously. The sad thing is that most caregivers I know do not have the same commitment or compassion for themselves.

Some of the meanest things I've ever said were to myself. I often lack the same consideration and empathy for myself when I need it the most that I have for everyone else.

The irony about this is that not only do the caregivers themselves suffer from lack of self care but in the long run those they care for suffer also. Without kindness to ourselves, we caregivers can suffer due to exhaustion, hunger, self criticism, and even untreated physical ailments. It's hard to be our personal best when we are caring for others.

It is so important that we are kind to ourselves and give ourselves a break when we take on the job of caregiving. The analogy of putting your oxygen mask on first before you help others in an airplane emergency has been used over and over but still remains a powerful reminder of how we need to prioritize our own self care before we can help others.

We must be patient and understanding when we are tired or sad or frustrated or angry or our day is just not going well. Instead of self criticism and beating ourselves up we need to have a positive, supportive conversation with ourselves.

The next time you are putting yourself down or criticizing your behavior think about being kind to yourself.

So listen to the conversation in your head. The next time you are putting yourself down or criticizing your behavior think about being kind to yourself. See if you can speak to yourself in a understanding supportive and compassionate way. Look at all you've accomplished and what a great caregiver you are.

Whatever you are in the midst of tell yourself you are doing the best you can and that alone is more than enough. Treat yourself as you would a friend or loved one. Be your own best friend, you deserve it.



Tip #5: Do the Task at Hand

It is so easy to become overwhelmed by the extraordinary amount of things we must do as caregivers on a daily basis: phone calls, medications, doctors appointments, food, bathing, insurance questions and finances are just some of things on that monster to-do list!

If we let our glass-half-empty self begin a conversation in our heads about how we are never going to get it done, nothing is going to go right and we are going to fail--we can get pulled into a black hole of stress and anxiety.

I have learned that once I start singing the song of doom and gloom and allow the wave of hopelessness and helplessness wash over me, I can get frozen and stuck and absolutely nothing gets done.



So, I follow advice that was given to me to help me avoid feeling so anxious; I was told to "Do the task at hand!" In other words, tackle one thing on the to do list at a time and the list will get done.

I begin this process by writing down exactly what must get done today.

That list is never as bad as I think it is once I see it on paper. I then begin to knock off the tasks one at a time. I concentrate on that task only and try not to worry about anything else. Once I get that first one done it gets scratched off the list and I move on to doing the next task at hand.

It's amazing how much I can get done and how much calmer I become.

Most importantly, at the end of the day I give myself a big pat on the back for doing a great job, and I reassure myself that anything I didn't get to today will be handled tomorrow in the same steady, purposeful way. By taking one day and one task at a time and giving myself credit for a job well done, my life becomes more manageable.

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Tip #6: Know You are Doing Enough Already

A dear friend's mother recently broke her hip and landed in the hospital. She developed complications and had to remain in critical care until she stabilized.

My friend, the primary caregiver, put together a team of family and friends who supported and helped her by going to the hospital and checking in when she couldn't be there since she had a full-time job. She was also in constant communication with the nurses station and the doctor on call. In short, she had done everything she could to effectively and efficiently manage the situation and her mom's care.

Nevertheless, she began to feel anxious and guilty that she was not by her mother's side every moment. Because of this, she tried commuting to the hospital every morning and night before and after work. She began to wear herself out physically and emotionally. The caregiver trap of feeling she could never do enough began to get her down.

I shared with her that I, too, had a tendency to feel guilty or anxious if I was not by my parents side at all times. I quickly learned that it was not helping anything; if I began to drive myself to the brink of exhaustion, I was not only putting myself at risk--I was putting my loved ones at risk as well. I was not able to make good decisions when sleep deprived or anxious, and I needed a clear head when my loved ones were in critical condition.

As caregivers, we must realize that in general we will always feel that we are never doing enough, especially in times of medical crisis. This type of thinking is damaging and actually dangerous, especially in times of crisis that we must be sure to take extremely good care of ourselves. We need to get good rest, eat well and stay healthy.

We need to accept our best efforts as being enough. We need to pace ourselves and believe we are always doing the absolute best we can. We cannot always control the outcome of life on life's terms but we can make sure we can control how we take care of ourselves as we care for others.

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So know you are doing more than enough, pace yourself, ask for help and take radical good care of yourself. Then let go and let God.



Tip #7: Know the Caregiving Blues are Normal

There are many thoughts, feelings, and worries in the caregiving landscape. Some of the most challenging are what I call “The Caregiving Blues.”

There were many mornings that I woke up feeling sad, anxious, and defeated before my feet even touched the ground.

The worst part about these feelings was the fact that I felt guilty about them.

It was bad enough that I felt overwhelmed and sad, but on top of that, I felt that there was something wrong with me because I felt this way.

Please take heart. The Caregiving Blues are just a normal side effect of caregiving. There are so many factors affecting our state of mind, and heart and exhaustion alone can trigger these blues.

Rather than beating myself up for feeling a little down and defeated, I soon learned that if I gave myself permission to feel this way and acknowledge that my feelings were perfectly normal, I could then give myself a break. I would try to find ways to soothe, console, and take extra good care of myself until I was feeling a bit better and renewed.

These blues actually became a blessing because they brought attention to the fact that I probably needed a break and some radical self care. This included talking to family, friends, and a therapist, arranging for someone to take over for me for a day or afternoon so I could get away for a short break, finding a support group, treating myself to a nap, a manicure, a good night's sleep, and anything that made me feel good about myself.

I also made sure I spoke to my family doctor and therapist about any lingering feelings of depression or sadness just to make sure there were no underlying issues building up.

In general I learned to cope with my caregiving blues by accepting that they were part of the territory, and I was just feeling the normal sadness that every caregiver feels for a variety of reasons.

It didn't make me a bad caregiver or person, nor was I doing a bad job. I was just feeling a legitimate sadness which would pass, and I deserved to take good care of myself until it did. I needed to be as patient with myself as I was with my parents when they felt sad.

So when those Caregiver Blues hit you, allow yourself to feel those feelings without guilt or shame. Know that your feelings are normal and an indicator that you need to practice radical self-care and love. You deserve it.

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To learn more about Caregiver Warrior
and Susanne White, visit
www.caregiverwarrior.com

