



10 Common

Caregiver

Confessions

Carol Bradley Bursack, CDSGF
, Minding Our Elders

Wouldn't it be nice to be a family caregiver who never gets frustrated and is an eternal optimist? Maybe there are some like that out there. If you are one of them, I applaud your emotional strength and resilience. However, many of us who have provided care for aging and ill loved ones do not fall into that category. I know I don't.

Each day, we face new challenges and try, once again, to solve those that keep recurring. Being a caregiver is hard work, and it is impossible to keep a level head at all times. Moments of sadness, frustration and anger can easily get the best of us and cause our thoughts to take a rather dark turn. Sometimes they can leave us mired in guilt, wondering, "Did I really just think that?" It's important to remember that these negative thoughts are a completely normal reaction to a stressful and sometimes thankless situation. Rather than guilt yourself for how you feel, the key to getting past these thoughts is understanding that you're not the only one who experiences them. Here's a sampling of common "caregiver confessions" that I've heard, and that at times I've felt myself.

Difficult Caregiver Thoughts

1. I have no life of my own and I'm sick of it.
2. Mom/Dad tries to control everything I do—it's exhausting.
3. How much longer can I continue caregiving? I'm at the end of my rope and there is no end in sight.
4. My loved one has no clue what I sacrifice to care for them. I can't do it anymore.
5. Everybody constantly wants a piece of me and there's nothing left for myself.
6. I can't even bathe or visit the restroom without someone needing me.
7. I try so hard, but nothing I do ever pleases my care recipient.
8. I just want to scream or run away from it all.
9. Maybe if I just take all of Mom's sleeping pills, then I won't have to wake up to this again.
10. My loved one is suffering so much and they have no quality of life. Why can't they just let go and die?

How to Cope When Caregiving Is Too Much

Being honest with yourself about how you are feeling physically and emotionally will allow you to take steps to improve your mindset and quality of life. Obviously, some of these thoughts are more

serious than others. However, what is most important is the frequency and duration of these thoughts. Let's look at each one more closely.

“I have no life of my own and I'm sick of it.”

Caregivers are constantly shifting their focus from person to person and task to task. They're balancing careers, children, spouses, parents, pets, errands and housework, which leaves little time for them to catch a breath, let alone do something they enjoy. If this describes your life, you are beyond ready for some outside help. Whether that means hiring [in-home care](#) for respite so you can get away or asking a sibling to step in for a couple of weekends a month, it's time to make your life yours again. If you don't take a break, the resentment is bound to turn into caregiver burnout, which may lead to depression and serious health issues of your own.

“Mom/Dad tries to control everything I do—it's exhausting.”

Elders in need of constant care generally feel a lack of control over their lives as their abilities slip away. This can make some of them disagreeable and bossy as they try to exert control over whatever else they can. Typically, caregivers are the closest and most accommodating people around, so naturally, the needling falls on you.

Generally, the answer to this is to learn to [detach with love](#). If Mom picks on you for eating junk food or Dad insists the lawn isn't cut right, just let it go. You need to set some boundaries that determine what you will and will not respond to. Many things our loved ones say are irritating, but few of them are truly important enough to agonize over.

Often, if an [elderly parent is bossy and critical](#), it's more about them than it is about you. By detaching instead of reacting, you will let them know that they have been heard, but their message did not faze you. Try saying something like, “I'm sorry that's bothering you,” and then carry on with what you were doing. In this way, you'll be respectful, but you also won't be a doormat. They will likely get tired of trying to boss you around if you consistently refuse to give them the reaction they're looking for.

“How much longer can I continue caregiving? There is no end in sight.”

We all have these thoughts occasionally—usually during rough patches at work, with our kids, and with our significant others. If this feeling only happens once in a while, you're probably just having a normal reaction to a bad day. Caregiving can be tough and demanding. According to [Caregiving in the U.S. 2020](#), a report published by AARP and the National Alliance for Caregiving, the average duration of caregiving is 4.5 years—much longer than many family members anticipate when they take on this role. Understandably, they often become stressed and exhausted after mere weeks or months of providing care.

If you find yourself thinking thoughts like this often, you should make an appointment with your doctor. These feelings could be a sign of clinical depression, which can improve with therapy and/or medication. A break from constantly providing care is also in order. Talk with your doctor about how you are feeling and ask what resources are available to help you feel less overwhelmed and share the load of your loved one's care.

“My loved one has no clue what I sacrifice to care for them. I can't do it anymore.”

This is a tricky one. As caregivers, we don't want to make our care receivers feel like they are a burden. The flip side of this is that our loved ones can completely lose sight of how much we sacrifice because we try so hard to be pleasant and provide for them.

Furthermore, some care recipients are not cognitively capable of understanding the concept that their caregivers have other obligations, and that's something they can't help. If you still have a nagging thought that you are unappreciated and overwhelmed you may be burning out. Getting some respite care may help. Once the care receiver understands that you are serious about not just wanting a break but actually needing one, he or she may be more understanding of accepting help from others. Either way, it can't hurt to take some time off. You will feel refreshed and likely be able to cope better with the situation afterwards.

“Everybody constantly wants a piece of me, and there's nothing left for myself.”

Nearly every person has felt this way before. Even for non-caregivers, it's difficult to succeed at work, invest in friendships, nurture romantic relationships, raise children, take care of errands and still have time leftover for yourself. It seems that something always ends up neglected or half-done. Caregivers' time and energy is stretched even thinner and the stakes are even higher.

In most cases, we muddle through difficult days or weeks, but if this is an ongoing problem, you have clearly taken on too much responsibility. It's time to break down your tasks and delegate some of them to other people, whether it's family members or outside help. For example, if your spouse is feeling neglected because caregiving is cutting into your alone time, it may be time to say, “If you help me with some of this work, it'll get done faster and we'll have more time together.” If both of you are short on time, then try outsourcing the work by hiring a few hours of in-home care. Regardless of your situation, you need some time to devote to what and who is important to you, including yourself.

“I can't even bathe or use the restroom without someone needing me.”

This is often a literal problem. If you like to decompress by taking a half-hour breather in the evenings to relax in the tub, but you can't even take a brief bathroom break during the day, you are bound to feel some resentment. Things pop up occasionally, but if you can never truly take time for yourself just for the necessities, please look for some help. Even a senior companion from the [Retired Senior Volunteer Program](#) (RSVP) or a friend may be able to come over and sit with your loved one for an hour while you recharge your batteries. If that isn't possible, it's time to look into adult day care programs, a few hours of in-home care each day or assisted living.

“I try so hard, but nothing I do ever pleases my care recipient.”

See number two above. This behavior is often not about you. It's about them and their unhappiness over all of their losses. Do your best to [detach from the criticism](#) and get breaks when you can. Not taking criticism seriously is the best way to avoid resentment. If they complain about everything all the time, it's likely a control issue. But if it's isolated to one or two recurring things, a

remedy may be had. For example, if Mom always complains about what is for dinner, it could just be pickiness, or it could actually indicate that she's experiencing digestive issues, having trouble chewing things, or masking her concerns about the grocery bill.

“I just want to scream or run away from it all.”

This is likely to happen to even the most patient caregivers. It's human to feel overwhelmed by the constant needs of others. If this feeling is persistent, though, you could be experiencing caregiver burnout. It's time to get some help with your caregiving so you can have a break. It's also important to make an appointment with your doctor to make sure you aren't depressed or experiencing physical symptoms associated with the chronic stress you are under.

“Maybe if I just take all of Mom's sleeping pills, then I won't have to wake up to this again.”

This is a very serious thought that requires an appointment with your primary care physician or a mental health professional immediately. Even occasional thoughts like this can signal hopelessness, indicating you may be clinically depressed. Viable treatments are available, but you must take the first step in seeking them out. Suicidal ideation is a sure sign of distress. If you are experiencing suicidal thoughts, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255 or visit the website to use the [Lifeline Chat](#) tool and speak with a counselor. Please take care of yourself.

“My loved one is suffering so much and they have no quality of life. Why can't they just let go and die?”

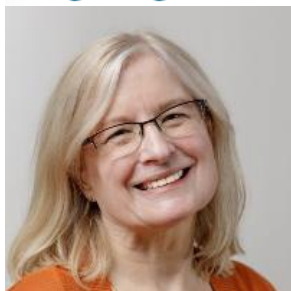
Believe it or not, this is a common thought and you aren't a bad person for thinking it. Why would you want to watch someone you love feel so ill day in and day out? Beginning palliative care to help manage their symptoms can help a great deal. If their condition is terminal, hospice care (a type of palliative care) is a wonderful next step. Usually one organization can arrange both kinds of care, depending on a patient's prognosis. The staff also offer counseling for family members, and they generally have volunteers who can assist with hands-on care.

Regardless of a loved one's prognosis, you need breaks. You can't sit by their bedside every minute for weeks or months at a time. There are worse things than death, so [drop the guilt](#). You aren't the only one who has had this thought, and it comes from a good place.

Take Charge of Your Life

Having passing “bad thoughts” is normal in life, especially in caregiving. You are probably tired, stressed and being pulled in all directions. However, if you find yourself consistently thinking in this negative manner, it's time for outside help in the form of respite care, a check-up with the doctor, some counseling and plenty of R&R. Your loved one's wellbeing is important, but remember, you should still be priority number one.

If you'd like to share your own feelings about caregiving and receive personalized support from other caregivers, pay a visit to the [AgingCare Caregiver Forum](#). You will find that you are in good company.



EXPERT

Carol Bradley Bursack, CDSGF

Minding Our Elders

About Carol Bradley Bursack, CDSGF

Over the span of two decades, author, columnist, consultant and speaker Carol Bradley Bursack cared for a neighbor and six elderly family members. Her experiences inspired her to pen "Minding Our Elders: Caregivers Share Their Personal Stories," a portable support group book for caregivers.