

Compassion fatigue is a danger for long-term caregivers



**CAROL
BRADLEY
BURSACK**

Minding
Our Elders



Dear Carol: My parents and in-laws all lived to be very old, with years of physical and cognitive decline. I willingly cared for them all. While I'm glad I could do that for them, once they'd all passed, my husband and I wanted to enjoy our lives traveling and doing things we'd dreamed of. We took just one cruise before my husband had a debilitating stroke. Now, he's miserable and depressed, and I'm feeling used up. I've experienced periods of burnout, but this is different. I love him dearly, and of course, I will continue to care for him, yet I feel distanced and flat. Almost numb. To do my best for my husband, I must find my way back toward really feeling again. Thank you for providing this anonymous outlet since I'm ashamed for anyone to know. – HY

Dear HY: My heart is with you. After more years of caregiving than most people could handle, you and your husband have had a shattering blow that has dramatically changed your celebratory plans. You're likely suffering from compassion fatigue, something apart from caregiver burnout. There is no shame in that.

What's the difference?

Burnout is that gradual feeling that comes when we get few breaks with no end in sight. On the other hand, compassion fatigue usually comes from the trauma of watching someone we care about suffer and feeling powerless to help. Burnout and compassion fatigue can overlap.

While physical and emotional exhaustion are common to both, compassion fatigue can reduce a person's sympathy and empathy toward others. People can feel disconnected from the person they are caring for and less gratified by caregiving as a calling. Additionally, they may isolate themselves and avoid friends and family.

Recognizing this change in your normal feelings is the first step, so you're making progress even if you don't see that yet. The next step is to remind yourself that doing small things for yourself will benefit both of you.

That means paying more attention to your diet, exercise and friendships.

I know. I know. The question is how. When you're feeling this disconnected, it's nearly impossible to move forward, but you must. See your doctor for a physical, and while there, ask for a referral (if needed) to see a counselor, as well. Depression is common with stroke, so your husband might also benefit from counseling.

Join a caregiver support group. The Family Caregiver Alliance (caregiver.org) and AgingCare (agingcare.com) are good, and AARP has a well-moderated group on Facebook. Support from others who understand can help immensely.

If your husband can't be left alone, consider in-home care services. Most of the cost will likely be out-of-pocket, but breaks are essential for both of you to have a better quality of life.

Understand that what you're experiencing is a normal reaction to this enormous change affecting you as individuals and as a couple. Take whatever steps you need to improve your health and well-being, HY. Huge hug. I'll be thinking of you.

Carol Bradley Bursack, a certified dementia support group facilitator, has provided care for multiple family members. She's also an author, newspaper columnist, consultant, and blog host at www.mindingoureldersblog.com.