

From Del: At the bottom under Related Articles, all three questions have good information on this topic. Under the other categories on questions, some of those are repeat from things I've shared in the past. They are in my files if you are ever interested.

Overcoming Negative Emotions While Caregiving

Anne-Marie Botek

Do you ever wonder why it is so easy to get caught in a rut of negative thinking?

Once you start seeing a particular situation as difficult, it's almost impossible to see it as anything else—especially when you are faced with exceedingly demanding circumstances like caring for an elderly loved one.

There's no doubt that being a family caregiver involves a great deal of responsibility, sacrifice and stress. However, some experts believe that researchers and the media make caregiving even more difficult by consistently portraying the role in a negative light.

[Stephen Post, Ph.D.](#), director of the Center for Medical Humanities, Compassionate Care and Bioethics at Stony Brook University in southeastern New York, says that the bleak language used to cover caregiving topics does caregivers a great injustice.

"The dominant language is all about the burden," he explains. "We say things like 'the never-ending goodbye' or 'he/she has become a chore.' Efforts need to be made to help caregivers recognize, acknowledge and celebrate moments of unveiled, continuing self-identity in their loved ones."

A former caregiver himself, Post knows the challenges inherent in caring for an elderly loved one all too well. But he has also seen the positive side of caregiving firsthand—those situations where caregivers have gained a renewed sense of purpose because they have been given the task of looking after those they love.

As a leader in research on the benefits of giving and compassionate care, Post says he's working on specific strategies to help caregivers become more aware of the encouraging aspects of their interactions with their loved ones since no definitive methods currently exist.

Devising an overall plan for cultivating awareness in a caregiver's life is important because each caregiving journey is unique. Post says that much of the literature on caregiving treats it as a universal experience when, in reality, nothing could be further from the truth. While there are common challenges associated with this role, each person experiences caregiving in a different way because each brings their own thoughts, feelings, interpretations and biases to the table.

How Caregivers Can Escape Negative Thinking

It's easy for a caregiver to become "stuck" in a pessimistic mindset while caring for their elderly loved one. "When you're in a place that is so difficult, challenging and bleak 24/7, it becomes very difficult because your mind is constantly rehearsing the difficulty," acknowledges [Marsha Lucas Ph.D.](#), a psychologist who specializes in the neuropsychology of relationships.

This is one reason why caregivers can become frustrated when well-meaning friends and family tell them to "just be more positive" or suggest that chanting a mantra will automatically make them happier.

Lucas, another former caregiver, says that these techniques are akin to “trying to pull yourself up by your intellectual bootstraps” and are likely to be ineffective in the long run because they don’t address the real issue at hand: how a caregiver’s mind is interpreting and responding to their environment.

She says that the key to breaking the cycle of negativity may lie in a technique called “mindful awareness.” Through the practice of mindfulness, a caregiver can utilize one of their brain’s most powerful skills: neuroplasticity. This ability is what allows the mind to change neural connections and pathways to compensate for injuries and adapt to new situations and environments.

Practicing mindfulness involves engaging in a kind of meditation (no, there’s no chanting involved) geared towards helping a person re-connect with themselves. Lucas says that, put simply, mindfulness is about noticing what is going on for you.

“It may be grief, anger, resentment, anything,” she notes. “What you’re creating is room inside yourself to understand that your experience and your feelings in the moment (that are true and real), are not necessarily all that there is.”

What Is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) is a program created by Jon Kabat-Zinn, Ph.D., in 1979. Its goal was to use mind/body interactions to facilitate healing and improve quality of life for people with chronic pain and/or stress related disorders. Research has shown many benefits of mindfulness, including improved sleep quality, immune function, memory, self-esteem, decision-making and emotion regulation.

At its core, **mindfulness** is about being fully present in the moment at hand. That means being aware and non-judgmental of your thoughts and feelings, the physical sensations you are experiencing, and the things that are occurring around you.

Take something as simple as eating for example. Eating mindfully means consciously being aware of the process of eating: what we taste, the sensation of chewing, what we smell or feel as we eat, and how we react to these sensations. Most Americans are in the habit of eating unmindfully. We’re thinking about a hundred and one other things during a meal. We’re often talking, watching TV or reading. We eat quickly, sometimes without sitting down, while driving or while tending to other tasks. Only a very small part of our awareness is focused on the act of eating. We may be only barely aware of the physical sensations involved in this process and even less aware of our thoughts and emotions during it.

The same is true for caregiving. Without acknowledging and accepting our feelings in the moment, there is little hope that we will be able to alter our attitudes and behaviors to be more positive. Furthermore, concentrating on the here and now takes the place of ruminating over past events and worrying about the future. Being present helps improve focus and reduces caregiver stress.

How to Practice Mindfulness as a Caregiver

There are many ways that caregivers can cultivate mindfulness. There are formal programs, specialized therapy models, different types of meditation and casual exercises that you can use to develop and hone this skill. Lucas offers the following tips for caregivers seeking to start their own mindfulness practice and put an end to negative thought patterns:

- Start small. Lucas says it’s helpful to carve out a tiny five- or ten-minute chunk of time during the day to practice. Try to find a way of sitting that is comfortable for you. Close your eyes and focus on the moment. Scan your body. Notice your breath, how the air is

rushing in and out of your nose. Notice how your body feels as you sit. Notice the physical sensations you are experiencing instead of dwelling on your mental playlist.

- Periodically hit the reset button. In order to retrain the neural pathways in your brain, Lucas suggests taking time throughout the day to check in with yourself. It doesn't need to be more than a second or two—just try to examine where your mind is and how you are feeling. If you find that you're thinking about all the stuff you still have to do, or dwelling on a fight you just had with your loved one, try gently bringing your awareness back to what you are currently doing in that moment. Lucas likens this cycle of noticing your wandering thoughts and bringing them back to the present, to doing a “mental bicep curl” that will help strengthen your brain's mindfulness pathway.
- Remember, it's okay to wander. Your mind will wander, especially in the beginning, and that's okay. Lucas says that most people only go a few seconds before their minds ramble out of the present moment. In these situations, remember to be gentle and understanding with yourself.

Practicing mindfulness won't safeguard you against all negativity. But, according to Lucas, over time, it can improve your ability to control your body's physical response to anxiety and anger, help you become more emotionally resilient, and increase your feelings of empathy for yourself and the people around you.

Lucas sees only benefits for caregivers who seek to become more aware of their thoughts and emotions. “Mindfulness gets you out of the long over-trained way of doing things. It allows you to bring forth the best of you and bring the best to the world. It's not going to make caregiving sunny and bright, but it will remind you of your own vitality,” she points out.

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