



Loving Yourself: A Caregiver's Ultimate Challenge

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We've all heard that we must first learn to love ourselves before we can love others. Yet, many of us have grown up with family members who were hard on us or taught us that that self-love is selfish or arrogant, which couldn't be further from the truth.

What Is Self-Love?

Louise Hay, a founder of the self-help movement and author of several New Thought motivational books, defines self-love as a deep, unconditional acceptance and appreciation for all parts of who we are. Self-love is the culmination of building awareness of ourselves, nurturing our minds and bodies, and acknowledging that we are good and valuable both inherently and because of the things we have accomplished.

How Caregiving Affects Our Sense of Self

Family members who are caring for aging loved ones often "lose themselves" in the process. Many experience caregiver guilt and endure a great deal of stress that radically changes their self-concept and world view. We know that people make mistakes, but, as family caregivers, we seem to expect a degree of perfection from ourselves that simply isn't possible. This unrealistic view can leave us feeling consistently defeated. Over the long term, this mindset damages one's concept of self-worth and leads to a spiral of negative thinking.

While there is no magical roadmap to help us navigate all the trials and tribulations of life, especially life as a caregiver, we can adjust our attitudes to help make things a little easier on ourselves. We can work on our self-esteem enough that eventually—sometimes with the aid of professional counseling—we can learn to love and care for ourselves despite our perceived flaws. This is a challenging change to make but will transform us into happier people and better caregivers. Learning how to love yourself is a win/win.

The Dos and Don'ts of Learning Self-Love

So, how do we start? The best way to begin is by examining your attitude toward and thoughts about yourself and your current situation. Lasting progress can't be made by glossing over underlying issues and ignoring reality. We'll start with a series of "don'ts" that can help you identify damaging patterns of thinking and behaving, learn how to quit these bad habits and give you a clean slate to build upon with the "dos" that are meant to build you up.

Self-Destructive Thoughts and Behaviors Caregivers Should Avoid

- ***Don't compare yourself to others.***
No one leads a perfect life. Even though some people appear to live in a way that seems charmed, they make mistakes, too. Comparing ourselves to other people is a sure path toward envy, disappointment and self-loathing. This includes other caregivers, family members, friends and even strangers.
- ***Don't accept unearned guilt.***
The stakes are very high for family caregivers and guilt is a common occurrence. Aging loved ones often make unrealistic demands or cannot clearly communicate their needs. We fall into a pattern of asking ourselves if we are doing the right things and whether our actions are "enough." To make matters worse, our care recipients are often on the final journey of their lives and nothing we do can prevent that decline. In our heads we know this is the truth. However, our hearts often tell us that if we were doing a better job meeting their care needs, then our loved ones would be happier and could maybe even live longer. Let go of [caregiver guilt](#). We are powerless to stop the inevitable cycle of life and death. You are doing a wonderful thing for your loved one and giving your best. That is all you can do.
- ***Don't buy into the myth that every disease can be cured.***
Alzheimer's disease is a prime example. There is currently no cure, and there likely won't be one for many years to come. Do your best to provide your loved one with comfort and care but understand that a few minutes of contentment may be all we can offer our care receivers. Revel in those moments and give yourself credit when such things happen.
- ***Don't believe everything you read or hear.***
Even the best intended advice we receive—including this article—is not for everyone. Each caregiver's situation is different. We live in different places with different resources available to us. We come from different economic situations. Our family dynamics are unique. We have one-of-a-kind personalities. This concept goes back to comparing ourselves to others. Absolutely seek out sources of inspiration and assistance, but sift through the information you find to see what truly applies to your distinct situation and let the rest go.
- ***Don't let pessimism or depression rule your life.***
If you are clinically depressed—and many caregivers are—get help. Taking care of your own health will, in the end, help your care receiver. If your personality is naturally pessimistic, counseling and interventions like cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) can help you adopt a more realistic, if not optimistic, perspective. Studies have shown that optimistic individuals live 11 to 15 percent longer and, in many cases, lead healthier lives. Some effort to skew your outlook in that direction is generally time well spent.

Healthy Thoughts and Behaviors Caregivers Should Embrace

- ***Accept your flaws as part of your humanity.***
There are probably things about yourself that you feel could use some work, but remember that imperfection is human. Accept this simple fact and you'll feel a weight lifted off your mind.
- ***Meditate.***
Meditation can take countless forms. Some people simply enjoy time alone letting their minds wander without direction. Others prefer guided meditation with soothing music and/or a soft voice coaching them to relax. Perhaps you would prefer prayer and spiritual meditation, practicing yoga, going for a run, or simply going outside to spend time in a quiet, natural setting. The options are endless. Find something that works for you and stick to it. Many studies have shown that meditation of any form can lower blood pressure, decrease stress and increase our feelings of well-being.
- ***Exercise and eat well.***
Taking care of your body is an affirmation that you are loveable and important. There is an inherent "don't" in this "do," though. Don't shame yourself if you don't succeed in your goals. Otherwise, this defeats the purpose of self-care. Just aim to do better moving forward.
- ***Do something nice for another person.***
Don't do it for appreciation or thanks. Don't do it for admiration from onlookers. Do it for yourself. You'll feel good in your heart and that will lift your spirits, at least temporarily. This type of activity can also help you love yourself for who you are, not for what others think of you. It doesn't have to be a grand gesture, but take a moment to help boost someone else's self-confidence every so often. That is a quality worth being proud of.
- ***Forgive others.***
Many people have lived through very difficult experiences, often brought on by others. Forgiveness doesn't mean that you forget these transgressions. Forgiveness means that you stop letting these negative events and people take up space in your head and heart. Letting go of these experiences will mean that they no longer hold power over your feelings and actions. Aim to be defined by the positive forces in your life rather than be held back by the negative ones.
- ***Forgive yourself.***
In order to love yourself, you have to forgive yourself, too. Most of what you hold against yourself probably isn't that bad anyway. Even if you have done something that disgusts you now, forgiving yourself can help ensure that you won't make the same mistake again. The past cannot be undone and carrying it around only undermines our attempts to leave behind feelings of guilt, regret and shame. All we can do is learn from our errors and vow to make better decisions going forward.

- ***Choose your support system wisely.***

Sometimes friends and [support groups](#) can help guide you and lift you up. These groups can be for caregivers, victims of abuse, those who are grieving, or whatever issue you feel is weighing you down. People there can listen to your feelings and experiences and relate to you. They will understand and accept you, even after you've told them about what you feel are your failures. Absorbing their unconditional love can help you accept your faults and learn to support others in return. Choose friends with similar goals in mind, and distance yourself from anyone who does not respect and cherish you and support your aspiration to love yourself completely.

If you can't genuinely acknowledge that you are worthy of other people's time and having your own needs met, it may be wise to seek professional counseling. Learning to genuinely love ourselves is not easy, especially given the mixed messages we've received throughout life. Finding a balance between giving to others and respecting ourselves is ideal. You don't have to apologize for who you are or how you feel. You are worthy of love.