

family caregiver's guide to  
COPING WITH **STRESS**



faqs, tips and best practices produced by

+  **HeartMath**<sup>®</sup>



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wishing you wellness

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## FAMILY CAREGIVER'S GUIDE TO COPING WITH STRESS

### Introduction

*We understand—It's not easy....*

Being a caregiver to a family member or friend is not easy. Depending on the needs of the person being cared for, the family caregiver's job is often a 24 hour, 7 day a week responsibility.

The stress of caregiving is not just physical. Indeed, the emotional toll of taking care of a loved one or friend can be overpowering. It is not easy to watch someone you care for having difficulty with the daily activities of life. It is emotionally taxing seeing a parent who once took such loving care of you become incapable of handling his or her own needs. It can be especially challenging if you have health or medical needs of your own and also are the primary caregiver and breadwinner of the family.

*You are not alone...*

Overall more than 50 million Americans provide care for a chronically ill, disabled or aged family member or friend in any given year. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services reports that 30% of family caregivers are themselves 65 years of age or older, while 15% are between the ages of 45 and 54. And these percentages are increasing each year as we live longer and as the huge generation of baby-boomers reaches older age. There are also approximately 1.4 million children ages 8 to 18 who provide some or all of the care for an adult relative—usually an ailing parent or grandparent.

A helpful caregiver is not just someone who takes care of someone in need. In order to be an effective caregiver, it is essential that you take care of yourself. That means getting enough rest; getting away from the daily routine by going out with friends or even taking a vacation; and having a back up system of support that can relieve you when the stress of caregiving is just too much to handle.

Yet, the reality is that most people caring for a loved one do not take adequate care of themselves and often end up in the doctor's office, or even the hospital, suffering from maladies such as exhaustion, depression, anxiety and even physical injury. As a result, they become less effective caregivers.

According to a study in the Journal of the American Medical Association, elderly spousal caregivers with a history of chronic illness themselves who are experiencing caregiving related stress have a 63% higher mortality rate than their non-caregiving peers. Research also shows that caregiving stress, regardless of one's age, can compromise the caregiver's immune system and accelerate aging.

In other words, caregiving can be hazardous to your own health if you find it difficult to handle the emotional and physical stress that inherently comes with it.

But we can help...

Which is why we have created HeartMath's **Family Caregiver's Guide to Coping with Stress**.

As the nation's leading research and training organization in stress reduction and performance enhancement, HeartMath has developed world-recognized, easy-to-do techniques and programs that will help you control your stress, take charge of your emotions and improve your ability to function at the highest level – no matter how taxing the situation.

So let's get started. Here, in an easy-to-follow question and answer format, are some tips, suggestions, techniques and links to help you cope with the rigors of caregiving.

### LET'S TALK ABOUT STRESS AND CAREGIVING

**Q: So what exactly is stress?**

**A:** If you look up the definition of stress in the dictionary you'll find this definition: "A mentally or emotionally disruptive or upsetting condition occurring in response to adverse external influences and capable of affecting physical health, usually characterized by increased heart rate, a rise in blood pressure, muscular tension, irritability, and depression." But as Paul J. Rosch, M.D. Chairman of the Board of the American Institute of Stress points out, if you ask a dozen people to define stress you are likely to get 12 different answers.

**Q: Does stress affect people in the same way?**

A: No matter what the “official” definitions of stress may be, stress manifests in how we feel. For each of us, stress can manifest in different ways. For some, a symptom of stress may be a headache or upset stomach. For others the symptom may be anxiety or depression. Symptoms of stress may prevent you from engaging with friends, lower your productivity at work or develop feelings of anger, isolation or fear. Stress can result from a perception or attitude. It can make you yell at your kids, want to punch your boss in the nose, or even cause you to make bad decisions that could effect your own or other’s safety. In other words, stress can seriously affect the way you function. It can negatively affect your health. And, it can badly erode your relationships with family and friends.

**Q: Wait a minute! I’ve heard that stress isn’t always bad. Is that true?**

A: That is true. Some people confuse challenge with stress. Science has shown that some stress can motivate or increase your performance, if it’s perceived as a challenge. A baseball player coming up to bat in the bottom of the ninth inning with two outs, his team behind by three runs and bases loaded, is under great pressure to hit a homerun. The stress of the moment can actually create a chemical reaction that heightens his ability to concentrate on the ball, strengthen his swing and belt one out of the park. But, science also has proven that too much stress quickly depletes one’s ability to operate at peak performance. So if that batter had been in a similar situation every time he came to bat that day, he would be more likely to get distressed and strike out than be the hero.

So while some challenges can be motivating, too many are harmful. It’s finding the right balance that becomes the important goal. And each person’s balance is different. A lot has to do with attitude and resilience.

**Q: As a caregiver, I know I suffer from stress but does anyone know just what the impact of that stress is?**

A: Indeed they do. And the news is not good. One study found that family caregivers who provide care 36 or more hours weekly are more likely than non-caregivers to experience symptoms of depression or

anxiety. For those caring for a parent the rate is twice as high and for spouses, the rate is six times higher. Stress on the family caregiver taking care of a person with dementia has been documented to negatively impact the caregiver's immune system for up to three years after their caregiving ends – thus increasing their own chances of developing a chronic illness. And then this very sobering finding related to stress on the caregiver: Family caregivers experiencing extreme stress have been shown to age prematurely. This level of stress can take as much as 10 years off a family caregiver's life.

**Q: So the stress of caregiving can truly have a negative impact on the caregiver's health. But what can I do about it?**

A: It's obvious that stress and caregiving often go hand-in-hand. The important thing is not to let the stress overpower you. In the next section, we offer you some time tested strategies for lowering your stress by altering your environment. And we will teach you HeartMath developed methods and techniques that will help you deal with the stress of caregiving and especially help you to cope with very hard to handle situations. These easy to learn techniques can bring you immediate relief and allow you to deal with highly stressful situations while controlling your emotions and protecting your health.

### LOWERING AND COPING WITH THE STRESS OF CAREGIVING

**Q: I'm the only person in the family really able to provide care for my loved one. I don't really trust other people taking care of my loved one. But, I don't know if I can handle this for much longer. How can I lower my stress?**

A: This may sound unkind, but don't be a martyr! No matter how competent you are, you cannot do everything. You are not helping the person you care for if you are constantly tired, angry and cut-off from the rest of the world. The quicker you realize this, the better care you will provide. That's why it is important to find out what help may be available in your community or region that can relieve you of some of the burden you are now encountering.

**Q: That's easier said than done! Can you give me some suggestions?**

A: Indeed. First, arrange to have regular back up. Try to have another family member or friend relieve you on a regular basis. This is often easier said than done, but it is essential. Ask members of your church or synagogue to help you find someone to come in a few hours, several days a week to give you a break. Neighbors can often help. Explain your loved one's needs and set expectations.

You should also check with local service agencies for low cost and free services that provide aides and homemaker services that will come in and give you a break. A good source to helping you find these services is the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging. Contact them at [www.n4a.org](http://www.n4a.org) . Or call them at 1-800-677-1116. Check with your county's welfare office for other assistance that may be available. Don't automatically assume that your loved one won't get along with the person who pinch hits for you. Explain to the local service agency your loved one's peculiarities and the type of assistance and understanding required. Often, the person you are caring for needs a break from you as much as you need a break from him or her.

**Q. I've had to give up my job to take care of my loved one. And the financial pressures are adding to my stress. Are there services outside the home I can use that will allow me to go back to work, at least part time?**

A: Yes there are. If you are taking care of a child, your state's Department of Public Welfare or Youth Services should be able to find you out-of-home care. If your child is school aged, federal law requires that schools provide full day programs and even after school programs and daycare for children with disabilities. Check with your local Congressman or state representative's office about your rights to services and those available.

If you are taking care of an adult, check into adult daycare. Unless the person you are caring for is unable to leave the home, most communities have free or low cost adult day care programs. These are often wonderful programs that will transport your loved one, even if physically disabled, to a center where trained staff provide daily programs, appropriate to the person's ability. They also usually provide at least one meal. This is an ideal way for the person being cared for to socialize and for you the caregiver to rest or go out with

friends to a movie or lunch. You should check with your local area Agency on Aging, noted above, or contact your local or state office of public welfare. Even a break one or two afternoons a week can help you regain your own senses and rest.

**Q: Is there some way for me to get away for a few days? I know my level of stress would decline and I'd be a better caregiver if I could just get take a day or two vacation.**

A: Yes, there are special programs that can provide the help you are seeking. They are called respite care services. Respite care is temporary relief for caregivers and families who are caring for those with disabilities, chronic or terminal illnesses, or the elderly. There are many respite care programs in each state that will take a person needing care for a few days to a few weeks. An excellent source of finding such programs is **the ARCH Respite Network**. [Click here](#) to search their website for programs in your own area. Again, you should also check with your local welfare department for a list of other services.

**Q: Those are all excellent suggestions. But, I also need help learning how to control my emotions. The stress of caregiving often makes me angry, impatient and anxious. Can you help me deal with those issues?**

A: Yes we can. Here at HeartMath, we have become the international leader in helping people transform their stress into positive emotions, helping you become calmer, more focused and able to handle very difficult situations.

For almost two decades we have worked with tens of thousands of individuals helping them regulate their emotions and become more productive and happy. We have worked with professionals in extremely stressful occupations such as nurses, police officers and teachers to teach them stress-reduction techniques that can almost instantaneously transform their stress-caused feelings into a more positive state. Our techniques are also used by many physicians to help their patients reduce their stress, anxiety and other emotional and physical symptoms. Our programs include pre and post stress assessments, training and coaching in stress management tools, and emWave® heart rhythm feedback technologies that help you transform stress into productive, creative energy.

**Q: That sounds terrific. But how do I know HeartMath techniques really work?**

A: HeartMath stress-reduction techniques are all based on science. We have rigorously tested our techniques in conjunction with leading medical schools and universities. There have been numerous articles published in distinguished medical and other journals verifying the effectiveness of our programs. (For more information on HeartMath research go to [www.heartmath.org/research](http://www.heartmath.org/research).) Our techniques have been tested in school settings to help disruptive children, with employers to help retain highly stressed employees and even with returning military personnel suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome – all with excellent results.

**Q: OK. I'm ready to learn how to control my stress, regain control of my emotions and be a better, more effective caregiver. But what is the basis of the HeartMath program? Why are your techniques better than other stress reduction programs?**

A: What makes the HeartMath approach to stress management different from others is that our scientific research has found that stress control emanates from the heart rather than the brain! Now that may sound surprising to you, but our almost two decades of research has confirmed that the heart's role in stress management is far more significant than previously thought. And our scientific research has been confirmed by many other leading medical authorities.

**If you are interested in a more thorough scientific explanation about the heart and its role in stress [click here](#). You'll read an enlightening research paper from our sister organization, the nonprofit HeartMath Institute.**

**Q: Tell me more about the HeartMath approach to stress management and helping to keep control of my emotions.**

A. At the core of the HeartMath method of emotional regulation is the idea that, by focusing on positive feelings such as appreciation, care, or compassion, anyone can create dramatic changes in his or her heart rhythms. By focusing on these positive feelings and changing your heart rhythms, you set in motion a series of neural, hormonal,

and biochemical events that dissipate stress and anger and lead to greater well-being. As a result blood pressure drops, stress hormone levels fall, immune system activity increases, and anti-aging hormone levels rise. In other words, the HeartMath stress management techniques address the core issues that so often negatively affect a family caregiver.

And the techniques that follow teach you how to engage your heart to bring emotion, body, and mind into balance, and help you stay in a zone of focused clarity, optimal health, and high performance. Changes brought about through this method are fast-acting and long-lasting—the perfect antidote to the stress and rigors of caring for a loved one.

### STRESS REDUCTION TECHNIQUES FOR THE FAMILY CAREGIVER

**Q: So help me get started. I feel like I am constantly under pressure caring for my loved one and my levels of stress seem to be forever increasing. What do I do first?**

**A:** We recommend starting with an easy to learn technique that has helped many people just like you. It's called Notice and Ease™. It is designed to help you ease out any stressful emotions and stop the emotional drain that results from the stress of caring for a loved one.

In order to shift out of the feeling of constant pressure, you first need to identify what you are feeling. By slowing down the emotional energy running through your system, you're better able to identify whether it is worry, anxiety, hurt, frustration, etc. Here are the steps:

1. Shift your focus to the area around your heart. Now feel your breath coming in through your heart area.
2. Notice and admit what you are feeling.
3. Try to name the feeling.
4. As you gently focus your attention in the area of your heart, relax as you breathe and tell yourself to e-a-s-e as you exhale. Continue to exhale e-a-s-e until you feel calm.

After a few attempts using this technique you will almost immediately feel calmer, more in control and better able to handle difficult situations.

**Q: I find that I become very anxious and worried the longer I care for my loved one. My doctor has given me medication, but it doesn't seem to help all that much. Is there something I can do to reduce my anxiety and worry?**

A: We recommend you try the HeartMath "Go to Neutral" technique to regain control of your emotions and mind. It is very common to become obsessed with a worrisome idea or thought. It just keeps running through your mind, over-and-over again, blocking out and limiting your ability to stay calm and collected.

The "Go to Neutral" tool will help keep you from jumping headlong into worries and projections about the future. Using Neutral will help dilute these draining thought loops until you can stop them and reestablish balance. You can find Neutral fast by engaging the power of the heart.

**Q. OK. What really is happening when I am in "Neutral?"**

Neutral is a place where one has more choice. In Neutral you don't have to buy into a worried projection or an assumption. Once in Neutral you have the space to ask yourself questions like, "What if it's not like I'm thinking it is?" "What if there's something I don't know?" "What if I really don't know?" Just asking your heart "What if...?" from a Neutral point creates the possibility for new ideas or for insights you've already had to become available to you again.

As you "Go to Neutral" you harness your emotional power. Neutral builds patience and allows for more possibilities to emerge. Neutral is a place within you where your wise self can talk to your disturbed self and save you a lot of headache and emotional strife—if you'll listen.

Someone may say, "Just stay neutral." "I'm neutral about it, are you neutral?" You can say yes, but neutral from the mind doesn't last long unless your emotions and heart are also put in neutral. Emotionally charged feelings can be hard to shift on the spot. Sometimes you are only able to go halfway. At these times, Neutral involves temporarily making peace with what isn't peaceful. This will

get easier as you practice shifting emotional state using the strength of your heart, not your mind. When your efforts are genuine and sincere, you'll find that strength.

When things are happening fast around us "Go to Neutral" helps us to stop in the moment and not add drama to the situation. As we become neutral we can see how to better respond and save energy.

**Q. So how do I get into Neutral?**

A. Here's how to utilize the Go to Neutral Tool.

1. When emotional triggers come up, take a time-out in the heart so that you can temporarily disengage from your thoughts and feelings—especially stressful ones.
2. Shift your focus to the area around your heart. Now feel your breath coming in through your heart and out through your solar plexus (stomach area).
3. Tell yourself "Go to Neutral" and not to go one way or the other in your thoughts or feelings about the issue. Hold to Neutral until your emotions and your perceptions ease up.

**Q. I think I get it but I seem to worry a great deal. Is this going to work right away?**

A. For some people, the technique works immediately. But if you start to slide back down into worry, just tell yourself to reset —use the steps of "Go to Neutral" again.

At first it's a good idea to practice "Go to Neutral" a dozen times or more, so you build enough heart power to stay in Neutral. That's important. It's like building a muscle and it takes exercise. To gain more heart power to stay in Neutral, breathe appreciation for your efforts and for any progress.

**Q: The stress of caring for my family member is often so great that I find myself getting angry, first at her and then at myself. Is there something I can do to curb those feelings when I feel them coming on?**

A: Because emotions work faster than thoughts your emotional self is suited up and ready for battle before your mental self even has a chance to remember that anger may not be what's needed in this situation. It's okay to feel anger and to recognize that you are angry. Then it's important to let that feeling go and shift into a more productive attitude in the moment.

As soon as you catch yourself getting irritated, frustrated, angry or enraged, try Notice and Ease or Go to Neutral to take the excess negative emotion out of your reaction and to shift into a more balanced and positive attitude.

As you practice these techniques, eventually you will learn to catch yourself and shift into a more centered and productive attitude in the moment.

**Q. The loved one I am taking care of is often agitated. The more agitated he becomes, the more agitated I become. Do you have some suggestions on how I might be able to keep the person I am caring for more calm and also how I might keep myself calm in these situations?**

A: The Heart Lock-In® technique is designed to help you and others to stay more balanced. During a Heart Lock-In, you find a quiet place to sit and generate in yourself a positive energy of appreciation, compassion or caring for yourself and your loved one for a few minutes. Most people find that doing a Heart Lock-In for five minutes or so, once or twice a day, helps ease their agitation and cushions the impact of day-to-day stressors. It also helps you maintain focus and see more clearly how to stop draining your energy.

Here is how to do the Heart Lock-In Technique:

1. Shift your attention to the area of your heart, and breathe slowly and deeply.
2. Find a sincere feeling of appreciation or care for someone or something in your life (a person, place, pet, or a goal you achieved, for example). Choose something that is easy to appreciate with no negative emotional history to color your appreciation. Hold that appreciation in your heart for twenty to thirty seconds.
3. Send these feelings of appreciation and care toward yourself and others. This benefits them and especially helps recharge and balance your own system.

If your mind starts wandering during a Heart Lock-In, simply refocus your attention on the heart area and reconnect with your real love, care, or appreciation.

As you keep pulling your attention back to the heart, you build power to find a state of ease and balanced care.

When you experience heavy, uncomfortable, or agitated feelings during a Heart Lock-In, don't worry. Acknowledging the feeling and breathing an attitude of ease can help release the disturbance.

Practicing Heart Lock-In helps you to stay calm and stop judging, blaming, and worrying. It helps build courage and compassion to carry out your heart's intentions.

One of the most effective times to practice Heart Lock-In is first thing in the morning before all the day's activity starts, to set the tone for your day. You'll stay more balanced in the midst of typical caregiver stressors, like getting your loved one dressed or fed and other potentially challenging situations.

**Q: As if caring for a loved one isn't enough, I often have to deal with health insurance companies, doctors offices and pharmacies who put me on hold or keep shifting me around from person to person. I find myself getting so angry as I wait interminably for someone to answer or get back on the line. What can I do to keep those emotions in check as my frustration increases?**

A: You can prepare for potentially stressful situations by using the Go to Neutral technique before you talk to the insurance company, pharmacist, doctor's office, or any situation that you know is likely to be frustrating. In fact, use any of these techniques before, during and after frustrating situations so you don't keep draining your energy. This will help you stay more balanced and calm throughout, saving you a tremendous amount of energy.

**Q: Do you have some other books, online resources or devices that might help me maintain my "cool"?**

A. We have a number of books and publications that may be helpful in learning HeartMath techniques to reduce your stress and manage your emotions. We also have a number of software programs and portable devices that can be of tremendous support in keeping calm and remaining cool when under great stress. You can learn about those products by [clicking here](#).

### OTHER RESOURCES

**Q: Can you recommend some other resources that can assist me as a caregiver?**

A: We sure can. Fortunately there are a number of organizations and websites that provide a great deal of useful information or support. Here are the places we recommend you turn to:

**www.gpssmartsole.com** - Looking for added security to help you rest easy? Our friends at GTX have come up with a discreet, wearable GPS tracking system. GPS tracking devices use GPS and cellular connectivity to send the location of your loved one anywhere in the country to you using any computer or smartphone. There are a variety of GPS devices small enough to fit on a keychain, watch, lanyard or even in a shoe; select a tracker that won't be forgotten at home, because the best GPS tracking device is one that is with them consistently. Many GPS tracking systems offer monitoring features like geo-fence boundary alerts for wander protection, S.O.S. alerts and an app for monitoring easily from your smartphone. Google GPS wearable technology for more information.

**[www.dailystrength.org/group/caregivers](http://www.dailystrength.org/group/caregivers)** - One of the most complete websites devoted strictly to family caregivers.

**[www.Access2wellness.com](http://www.Access2wellness.com)** - The single entry point into one of the broadest selections of assistance programs available to help uninsured and underinsured people who qualify, access prescription medications for free or at a discount.

**[www.usa.gov/federal-agencies/administration-on-aging](http://www.usa.gov/federal-agencies/administration-on-aging)** – **The federal Administration on Aging website can be most helpful.** **[www.aarp.org/home-family/caregiving/](http://www.aarp.org/home-family/caregiving/)** - AARP's caregiving website.

**[www.eldercare.gov](http://www.eldercare.gov)** – Federal government website designed to help you find resources for older adults in your community.

**[www.caregiver.org](http://www.caregiver.org)** – Website of the Family Caregiver Alliance.

**[www.medicare.gov](http://www.medicare.gov)** – Search "caregiver" on the Medicare website for a great deal of helpful information.

**<http://caregiveraction.org/>** – Website of the National Family Caregivers Association.

**[www.heartmath.org](http://www.heartmath.org)** and **[www.heartmath.com](http://www.heartmath.com)** – For more information on HeartMath, Inner Balance and emWave products.

**[www.heartmath.com/Personal-Growth/coaching.html](http://www.heartmath.com/Personal-Growth/coaching.html)** - For personal HeartMath instruction on managing stress.



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