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<https://www.wsj.com/articles/these-self-care-strategies-can-help-caregivers-cope-with-burnout-11640782803>

## TURNING POINTS

# These Self-Care Strategies Can Help Caregivers Cope With Burnout

If you feel worn down caring for others, there are a few important steps you can take to support your physical, financial and emotional health



By [Clare Ansberry](#) [Follow](#) / Photographs by Sebastian Hidalgo for *The Wall Street Journal*

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After another brutal year of caregiving, Denise Brown learned what she needed most and now offers that lesson to others.

Over the course of three months, her 87-year-old mother fell, had a heart attack and was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. Her 90-year-old father fell twice and required staples in his head, and her 60-year-old brother died unexpectedly.

"I felt like I was just managing crisis after crisis," says Ms. Brown, 58, who lives in Chicago.

Impatient and depleted, she took a week off, stayed in a downtown hotel, went out to lunch and visited an art museum. "I gave myself permission to rest," she says, taking the advice that she often gives to others as owner of the [Caregiving Years Training Academy](#), which trains and certifies caregiving consultants.

The nation's 53 million unpaid family caregivers are physically, emotionally and financially drained as they enter another pandemic winter, made more worrisome by [the surging Omicron variant](#) of Covid-19. The toll on this group, who are the backbone of the nation's long-term care system providing an estimated \$470 billion worth of free care, ripples through households and the workplace.



Over the course of three months, Ms. Brown's 87-year-old mother fell, had a heart attack and was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease.

The Rosalynn Carter Institute for Caregivers found that 20% of caregivers had to quit their full-time jobs, while 44% had to reduce their hours and work part time, according to a survey conducted in June and released in September.

"Caregivers have increased rates of chronic health conditions" and often deal with depression and isolation, says Jennifer Olsen, the chief executive of the institute, which offers programs to support caregivers. The institute recently joined with Crisis Text Line to provide a 24/7 hotline for caregivers, who need support.

With the New Year approaching, caregiving experts offer suggestions for caregivers looking to shore up their physical, mental and financial health.

## Physical Health

Luciano Grubissich, medical director of Family First, which offers caregiving-support benefits, saw more caregivers in the past year suffering from headaches, stomach aches and insomnia connected with stress and burnout.

"Caregiving is a very noble thing, but you need to be well to care for someone else," says Dr. Grubissich, who also has a master's degree in mental health counseling.

**'Caregiving is a very noble thing, but you need to be well to care for someone else.'**

— Dr. Luciano Grubissich, medical director of Family First

Call your doctor and make an appointment for a routine checkup or for neglected aches and pains. “When you are overwhelmed, take a small baby step,” he says. “Make one call. That can be your New Year’s resolution.”

If you’re able to, take a break from the physical experience of caregiving. Create a personal and comforting space in your house or yard, and go there to be alone and gather your thoughts, even if it is just for 10 minutes. Go for a walk in your neighborhood or park, and make it a daily priority. Lifting takes a toll on your back. Try to enlist a family member or friend to take over for an hour and get a massage.

If you aren’t sleeping well, take naps when you can, rather than relying on caffeine or energy drinks. Keep healthy snacks around—nuts, fresh fruits or whole-grain breakfast bars—and don’t be afraid to post a message to select friends letting them know that you could use a few prepared healthy dinners.

## Financial Health

Cynthia Haddad manages care for her 91-year-old mother and her 62-year-old brother, who has developmental disabilities. She also has two teenagers.

“I’m a super sandwich generation,” says Ms. Haddad, a certified financial planner [specializing in special-needs planning](#).

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Going into the New Year, she says families should create a budget, look at last year’s expenses and estimate expenses in 2022. If there isn’t enough income, look into government benefits, including for veterans, Supplemental Security Income and lesser-known forms of assistance.

For example, tax-free daily stipends are available in certain states, including Ms. Haddad’s home state of Massachusetts, for caregivers, who can be relatives—other than spouses and parents of minor children—and friends. “These are often overlooked,” she says.

So, too, is the Area Agency on Aging, which offers reimbursements for certain supplies and home modifications along with help managing bills.

Create a small “solution fund” to solve minor problems, suggests Ms. Brown. If you are having dinner guests but don’t have the time to clean, use the solution fund to pay for a housecleaner. If you’re feeling isolated, down and bored, consider using your solution fund to add a new streaming service.

## Emotional Health

For many caregivers, worries can feel endless and mentally exhausting. Every worry needs a plan, says Ms. Brown.



Ms. Brown rubs lotion on her father’s arms. Like her, many of the nation’s 53 million unpaid family caregivers have felt strained amid another pandemic winter.

If you’re worried about whom to call or text when there is an emergency, create a phone tree with contact information and the order in which each person should be called. Share that with family members. If you’re unsure what your parents want in their final days, or which people they want around, including estranged family members, ask them.

Remember to release pent-up emotions in a healthy way. On her staycation, Ms. Brown watched the 1998 movie “Stepmom,” which always makes her cry.

“You often want to cry for yourself, for all the pain and suffering you endure and witness,” she says. “If you can watch a movie, or listen to music that makes you cry, it can be a relief to release those emotions.”

Ask for help. “It’s OK to say you are at your wit’s end,” says Dr. Grubissich.

Just admitting it, he says, releases anxiety. Call your human resources department to see if the company has any benefits related to caregiving, and take advantage of them if they

do. If they don't, check the [Eldercare Locator](#), which lists services and resources including meals, home care, transportation and respite options available in different communities.

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