

Tip Sheet:

Coping with Caregiver Stress and Cancer

Here we share information on the role of caregivers and some of the concerns caregivers may experience while helping patients through their cancer treatment.

Who is a caregiver?

If you are a partner, family member, or friend who is helping someone through cancer treatment, you are a caregiver. You may be giving medicine, coordinating care, preparing meals, and/or providing emotional and physical support. You play a key role in how your loved one copes with his or her illness.

What you may be feeling

Being a caregiver can be one of the most rewarding things you'll ever do, but it can be stressful and exhausting. Caregiver stress can change over time, depending on where your loved one is in the treatment process, how much care your loved one needs, how often you come to the cancer center, or what the future looks like. You may feel:

- Overwhelmed
- Anxious or worried
- Frustrated or angry
- Guilty
- Tired and run down
- Confused
- Stressed (having trouble sleeping, headaches, irritable, etc.)

Here are some tips for maintaining your well-being:

Focus on what's important

When diagnosed with cancer, patients and families usually have to re-evaluate their priorities and focus on what's most important in their lives. You may have to cut back or settle for "good enough" when it comes to certain activities or tasks.

Accept help

You don't have to face this alone. Take an honest look at what you can and can't do. Ask for and accept help from friends, family, neighbors, and colleagues. People are often eager to lend a hand. Consider creating a list of what you might want help with. Use websites like CaringBridge (www.caringbridge.org) that allow caregivers to post updates on a personalized webpage.

Don't forget yourself!

Caregivers tend to neglect their own physical and emotional needs while focusing on their loved one. Pay attention to your own health so you have the energy you need for yourself and your loved one. As with flying, put on your own oxygen mask before helping others.

Take care of your body

- Eat healthful meals.
- Get enough rest. Short naps can help you recharge.
- Take your prescription medicines.
- Get regular exercise.
- Watch for signs of anxiety or depression in yourself.

- Talk with your primary care physician or your loved one’s cancer care team.
- Check your well-being by completing a self-assessment. Search online for “AMA Caregiver Self-Assessment Questionnaire” to find the American Medical Association’s tool.

Take care of your mind and spirit

- Keep a journal of your feelings and frustrations. Writing may help you reflect on your experience.
- Look for ways to find hope, meaning, and comfort, however you may find that. For example, you might pray, see friends, read, listen to music, or take a walk in nature.
- Be gentle on yourself. Try not to fret over what you did/didn’t do or say.
- Remember to find joy and laughter where you can.

Talk to others

Caring for someone with a serious illness can be lonely, and you may benefit from connecting with others who understand your challenges. In addition to talking with family and friends, you might:

- Connect with other caregivers to share information and coping strategies. Consider joining a support group or online forum like those sponsored by the American Cancer Society or CancerCare. Dana-Farber’s CancerConnect forum is at www.dana-farber.org/connect.
- Meet with a counselor (social worker, psychologist, faith/spiritual leader, etc.) to work through difficult thoughts.

Get organized

- Organize appointments and contacts to help reduce your daily stress.
- Make sure important documents are handy.
- Discuss medical, legal, and financial issues with your loved one early, before they may be needed.
- Educate yourself about your loved one’s diagnosis and treatment. This may help you feel more in control.

Long-distance caregiving

Caregiving from far away can increase feelings of stress and guilt. It can be helpful to identify a key contact on your loved one’s medical team and to have people you can call for check-ins or emergencies. You might use online or smartphone services like Skype or FaceTime to stay in touch with the person facing cancer.

Resources at Dana-Farber

Counseling

Dana-Farber clinical social workers, psychiatrists, and psychologists work with our medical providers to address the emotional and mental health needs of patients and, in some cases, family members. We provide support around anxiety, depression, sleeping difficulties, uncertainty, relationships, personal safety, and more. We can also talk with you about resources in the community to support you and your family. For more information, call **617-632-3301**.

Peer support

- Dana-Farber offers many support groups and can help find one in your community. For details, visit www.dana-farber.org/supportgroups or call **617-632-3301**.
- One-to-One is a free telephone-based program that connects Dana-Farber patients and families with trained volunteers who have experienced cancer. Call **617-632-4020** or visit www.dana-farber.org/onetoone.

- SoulMates is a program that connects new breast cancer patients with survivors who have faced a similar diagnosis. Call **617-632-6501** or visit **www.dana-farber.org/soulmates**.

Spiritual care

Chaplains from many faiths provide spiritual guidance and counseling. Our chapel, located on the second floor of the Yawkey Center, is also open for reflection and prayer. Call **617-632-5778**, email **DFCISpiritualCare@dfci.harvard.edu**, or visit **www.dana-farber.org/spirituality**.

Integrative therapies

The Leonard P. Zakim Center for Integrative Therapies and Healthy Living offers individual sessions in acupuncture, massage, reflexology, and Reiki, and free group programs in exercise/movement, meditation, and music and art therapy. Visit **www.dana-farber.org/zakim**, email **zakim_center@dfci.harvard.edu**, or call **617-632-3322**.

Exercise consults and classes

Dana-Farber's exercise specialist supports cancer patients and survivors who want to improve their fitness. To learn more or set up a free consult, call **617-632-4523** or visit **www.dana-farber.org/exercise**.

Nutrition

Our registered dietitians help cancer patients and survivors make healthy choices around foods, vitamins, and herbal supplements. Call **617-632-3006** or visit **www.dana-farber.org/nutrition**.

Friends' Place

Friends' Place is a specialty store on the first floor of the Yawkey Center that offers hats, wigs, scarves, prostheses, and more to help patients address physical changes that can result from cancer treatment. Call **617-632-2211** or visit **www.dana-farber.org/friendsplace**.

Blum Patient and Family Resource Center

The Blum Center, on the first floor of the Yawkey Center, is a comfortable place to learn more about cancer and its treatment. Stop by, call **617-632-5570**, or visit **www.dana-farber.org/resourcecenter**.

Dana-Farber caregiver tools and tips online

Visit **www.dana-farber.org/caregivers** to find many resources for caregivers, including PDF booklets on "Taking an Active Role," "How to Create a Caregiving Plan," and "Taking Care of Yourself." Enter "Support for Cancer Caregivers" in the search box to find more tips, from self-care to health insurance to coping with advanced cancer.

For more information

To access the internet during your visits to Dana-Farber, consider using one of the free computer workstations in the Blum Patient and Family Resource Center, or borrow an iPad from the Shapiro Center for Patients and Families. Both centers are on the first floor of the Yawkey Center.

This document is for informational purposes only. The content is not intended as a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always seek the advice of your physician or other qualified health provider with any questions you may have regarding a medical condition.