Avoiding MS Caregiver Burnout

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Caring for Someone with MS

When you're caring for a person with MS your workload is doubled. Unfortunately many caregivers crumble under the weight of that responsibility, succumbing to poor eating habits, bad sleeping patterns, less exercise and missed obligations. In fact, up to 50% will also become depressed, with serious consequences to their health and the health of their charges. This physical and emotional exhaustion is known as caregiver burnout.

Instead of reacting to these serious problems when they hit, learn to anticipate, recognize and treat them with better attention to your emotional and physical health.

The Importance of Preventing MS Caregiver Burnout

Everyone deals with stress a little differently, but there are some proven stress-relieving approaches that any caregiver should incorporate into their self-care:

- **Learn more about the disease**. When you care for someone with MS you become intimately aware of the daily effects of the disease, but it's important to know what to expect in the future as well. Learn the differences between remitting, progressive and relapsing MS, and choose your approach accordingly. Knowledge really is power, and you can eliminate many unnerving surprises and unexpected difficulties with a little more education.
- **Know the signs of burnout**. When you know which symptoms to look for, you can act more quickly to prevent a chronic condition. Watch out for physical signs of burnout, including frequent headaches, insomnia and upset stomach, but also pay attention to any emotional signs that could spell trouble, including mood swings, nervousness, sadness and problems with decision-making.
- **Stay in control.** A lot of stress comes from the sense that you're losing control over your situation, so get a handle on your attitude and responsibilities. Cognitive behavioural therapy focuses on positive thinking to overcome mental and physical hardship, and it can be immensely helpful for those in high-stress routines. Relax and recharge with the help of meditation, tai chi or gentle yoga.

Taking Your Physical Health to Heart

Stress management is important, but it's vital that you also take time for your physical health so that you don't suffer from illness or disability. Make the little changes that have big impacts on your daily routine, such as:

- **Preparing quick and healthy meals in advance.** Get the most out of your time in the kitchen, and prep lots of fresh food at once. Portion out your ingredients so they're ready to throw in the pan, or else get used to eating more raw snacks and salads, which saves energy and clean-up time (and keeps you energized!)
- **Limiting sugar and caffeine.** They'll both give you a quick burst of energy, which can be useful at times, but they will also sap your energy stores in the long-run. Try to phase out sugary soda and highly

caffeinated beverages with natural alternatives, like green tea and water with fresh fruit.

- **Pampering yourself.** Whatever you like to do most, find time to do it. It may seem like a luxury you can't afford, but pampering yourself does a lot of good for your body and spirit, which will certainly carry over to your caregiving.
- **Getting more exercise.** It's no secret that exercise can make a world of difference, from more energy and mobility to higher self-esteem and less pain. Simply walking more often is a great start, and you'll find that you are able to add more frequent and strenuous activity in a matter of weeks.

It's important to take care of yourself, not just for your own wellbeing, but also to continue in your role as a caregiver. Instead of letting your needs come second, rise to meet the physical, emotional and psychological challenges with confidence and competency.