

Top 5 Tips

Every carer
needs to know

Sara Challice



Tip No 1

**Check in with
yourself**

Why?

Because most carers are too busy being there for everyone else, that they ignore their own health.

So how are you?

Not the person you are caring for, but *you*. You may feel fine at present, but if you have been caring for a while, you may be a little frazzled around the edges.

Often friends and family may ask how the person you care for is holding up, however, they can often overlook the carer who may be struggling.

You may feel you are coping with caring, but often carers are treading water, and slowly sinking. It isn't until we hit rock bottom and fall ill that realise we have to make changes to recoup and safeguard our own health. This is where I went wrong. I suppress my feelings and ignored my own health. It was Neal who was ill, right? Not me. I then fell ill from the continued pressures and Neal ended up in a nursing home whilst I recovered. In not checking in with myself, I was eventually unable to care for Neal and others had to come to my aid.

The best solution is not to wait until a crisis strikes and to ensure we keep an eye on our own health, as difficult as this can be at times.

**The pressure can build up, bit by bit,
and go unnoticed**

Check in with yourself to remain well

You can do this in a number of ways:

1. Face-to-face

I would check in with my neighbour once a week on a Sunday evening, over a cup of tea. We would discuss how we were feeling, what had gone well that week and what hadn't. We would then discuss what needed to change.

Do you have a good friend or family member you could check in with, for a short time, once a week?

2. Over the phone or via Skype

If you don't have someone to check in with nearby, you could check in with a good friend or family member, over the phone or via Skype.

3. Journal

A great way to connect in with yourself is to journal (a fancy name for a pad & paper!) Write down the issues that are arising and how you are feeling.

Getting your thoughts out of your head and onto paper can help you to observe what is actually happening. I find, I then write down what I need to do to look after myself – it's like a personal coaching session.

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Tip No 2

**Drop the mask,
and ask!**

Why?

Because carers often put on a brave face, as they need to be strong for their loved ones.

Also, many accept their situation, feeling they have to struggle on alone.

Be honest, open up and ask for more support.

Many of us hide our feelings and people-please, for fear of being judged. But if you are caring for a loved one, you haven't got the time or energy to then please everyone else as well. What do you *really* have to do, and not have to do? What are the negotiables and non-negotiables? Know where to push back and say no, to ensure you have time and energy for yourself to find enjoyment in every day.

I often put on a brave face. It was like I wore a mask, wanting others to think I was coping, when in fact, I was not. I wasn't true to myself. This caused me more issues. So if other's ask how you are, be honest. You never know what they may say or what support they might offer.

Also, put the feelers out. There will be great services and charities in your area, offering help and support to those with particular conditions and their carers. There may also be a carer charity in your area. Give them a call and see what they can offer you. You may be pleasantly surprised!

Pluck up the courage and let them know

If you are struggling to open up:

You could write everything down that you need to say to another, then read through each point to them, over the phone. This helps to keep your conversation on track get your point across.

This worked for me. Also, if your're asking someone to come and help you care, let them know how appreciative you would be with their help.

Try being more direct

If you do ask family for help, try getting a date in the diary to make the commitment more certain. Otherwise time will drift along with empty promises.

Also be more direct with any services you are receiving

If you notice a service you receive is below standard, let them know. Not only is this good for yourself, but for anyone else who will be receiving this same service. It's often the only way to improve the services we receive.

Tip No 3

Take a break

Why?

Because we all need a break to recharge our batteries, and so do you.

And we can often feel guilty heading out to enjoy ourselves when our loved one is left at home.

Carers need regular breaks, to not only recoup, but also to enjoy quality time. These days, weeks, months and even years won't be back again, so we want to enjoy our time, whilst being there for our loved ones. When we are rested, we are then in a better frame of mind and can better deal with the challenges.

I also found, that in taking time away from caring, gave me better clarity on what was going on back at home. Because when you're busy caring, you can't see the wood for the trees. Having a break, gave me time to recoup and reflect. I then made better decisions, not just for myself, but for others.

Going into the outside space, can give you time to reflect on the inside space

Taking time out:

Socialising

It's important to keep in contact with good friends. They can pick us up when we're down and I felt my friends kept me sane! Also, too many carers feel isolated – we are social creatures and it's good to connect with others.

If you can, try and have regular breaks. This may mean asking friends or family, or charities with befriending services, to sit with your loved one. Or else you could pay a professional carer.

If you struggle to get out, you could call or Skype friends and family to catch up with them on a regular basis, or maybe ask them over.

Regular breaks throughout the day

Caring can become relentless and monotonous. Often a day can seem like one long list of endless chores – not a healthy way to live. **Try taking a breather between each task, to do something you enjoy.** It could just mean having a 10 minute kip, reading a book or going out for a short walk. Because if you just do this and just do that, you'll end up just falling into bed shattered!

Give yourself permission and take regular breaks.

Tip No 4

**Surround
yourself with
those who care**

Why?

Because your support network is key to helping you through these challenging times.

And because not all friends and family may have the empathy and compassion you need right now.

We all have friends and family who are there for us, and pick us up when we are down, but not everyone will be as understanding. Also, if you are the one stepping up to the mark of caring, there may be others taking a step back and leaving you to it.

This can leave you with feelings of resentment and further frustration, on top of the challenges of caring. Some may even judge from a distance or make negative comments, undermining all that our do. This is a common problem for carers.

As hurtful as this can be, try keeping your distance, either emotionally or physically, from anyone who is draining. Not all of us can cope well with illness or stressful situations. It can bring out the best or worst in people. Surround yourself with those who *are* there for you.

Also, if we haven't heard from some friends and family in a while, it may be down to us to pick up the phone and revive the communication. Life is hectic, and others may be going through their own issues. If you haven't heard from certain friends and family, you could try calling one more time to connect with them.

Whilst caring, I found that I had to let some friends go who were too draining. I believe they were the catalyst to my falling ill on top of caring. But in their place, I now have other friends who are much more loving and giving.

Focus on those who *are* there for you

Creating your support network

Who is there for you and lifts you up when you are down?

Can you make a list of family, friends, charities and any other services that are there to help and support you? You may be pleasantly surprised on how many are there for you.

Focus on those who do care and let them know how much you appreciate them.

Tip No 5

**Focus on
the good stuff**

Why?

Because we are often in survival mode, focussing on the problems and issues arising from caring and a loved one's illness, that we forget to focus on all the great things in our lives.

But it's important to focus on and appreciate all that we do have.

I remember being out one evening with Neal and friends, and telling them all about his illness and the treatment. After a while, Neal spoke up, "Can we talk about something else? I've come out to have a good time!"

He was right. We had come out for a nice meal with friends, but there I was focussing on the illness. It's good to let friends know what's going on, but not to become absorbed by it. From then on, I made a conscious decision to give a brief synopsis of Neal's condition, but then to turn our attention to the more fun and enjoyable things in life.

Nip it in the bud!

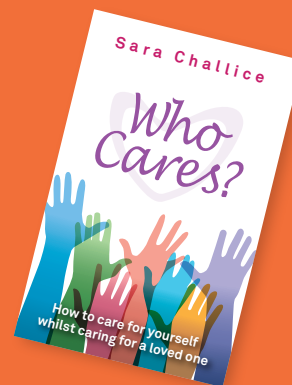
Apparently, whenever we start a train of thought, within 17 seconds it can have us gripped. Time can then fly as this thought takes us on a full-on ride, before we realise half an hour may have passed. When you start to worry about something, how long did your train of thought run? Five minutes? An hour? All day?

One way to stop negative thought loops is to pop an elastic band around your wrist. The next time you notice yourself starting to have a particular negative thought, give it a quick ping, to stop yourself. I've found this to be effective a number of times.

**Don't think about what you can't do,
think about what you can do**

Also, when I'm having a difficult day, I ask myself to think of five things I am grateful for. It could just be the hot shower I had that morning, good time with friends, or something I'm looking forward to. In getting into an attitude of gratitude, it can help shift our mood and put us in the receiving mode.

All content comes from the book, 'Who Cares? How to care for yourself whilst caring for a loved one', which will be out in March 2020 with Hammersmith Books



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