

Caregiver tips for saving time and energy

People who care for loved ones who are in ill health typically have a multitude of responsibilities. These include chauffeuring, shopping, running errands, paying bills, coordinating medical and other appointments, yard work, home maintenance, housekeeping, preparing meals, managing medication and assisting with personal care. It's easy for them to become overwhelmed by all of the demands on their time.

There don't seem to be enough hours in the day to get everything done, let alone spend time with other important people in their life (such as a spouse) and tend to their own needs.

If you are a caregiver, read on for some practical tips for lightening your load.

- Curb perfectionism. Not everything needs to be done to a high standard; take housework and yard maintenance, for example. Set a time limit for chores if necessary.
- Establish and stick to priorities, so you don't waste time or energy on unimportant things.
- Accept offers of help and ask other family members to share the load. Be specific about what you need.
- Pay for help if you can afford it – for example, a housecleaning service, grounds keeping service, handyman or accountant.
- Get a portable phone so you can multi-task while conversing, and an answering machine to screen calls.
- Get organized. Buy a wall calendar with plenty of space for noting appointments, and create or purchase a caregiving binder for keeping records. Hire a professional organizer if paperwork or your household in general is in disarray and you feel overwhelmed.
- Get a computer. Internet access can help you stay connected to loved ones, keep up with local and world news, and gather information about medical conditions and community resources, among other things. You can also connect with other caregivers through Internet message boards and chat rooms.

Meal preparation

- Collect recipes for one-dish meals, such as casseroles, stews, soups, stir fries and main course salads.
- Cook double batches of recipes and freeze half for later use.
- Keep a supply of heat-and-serve entrees in the freezer.
- Buy convenience foods that reduce preparation time: packaged salads, shredded cheese, fresh or frozen mixed vegetables and boneless chicken breasts, for example.
- Order takeout once a week. Keep menus in a folder for easy reference.

Housekeeping

- Get rid of things you don't need or use, to cut down on dusting and maintenance.
- Concentrate cleaning and tidying efforts on the rooms that are used the most.
- Do full loads of laundry whenever possible. Ensure everyone in the household has enough basic clothing to last for a week. Buy clothing that can be machine washed and dried (or hung to dry) and resists wrinkles.

Yard maintenance

- For gardening, stick to low-maintenance flowers and shrubs. Use mulch to discourage weed growth.
- Get a mulching lawn mower so you don't have to bag grass. Or hire a neighbourhood youth to cut the grass, as well as rake leaves and shovel snow.

Financial management

- Arrange with the bank for direct deposit of pension and pay cheques and automatic withdrawal of regular bills.
- If you have a computer, sign up for online banking so you can pay bills, transfer money and check balances from home.

Shopping and errands

- Shop through mail order catalogues, using the telephone or internet.
- For gift giving occasions, purchase gift cards; a wide variety is available online now, as well as on display at department stores and drug stores.
- Take advantage of stores and other services that offer home delivery (for example, grocery stores, drug stores, dry cleaners).
- Keep lists of groceries needed and errands to be done.
- Co-ordinate errands and avoid peak use times of the day, week or month when visiting stores, banks, government offices and other establishments. Also try to avoid rush hour traffic periods.
- If your relative can safely be left alone but either of you is anxious about the prospect, supply him or her with a portable phone and get yourself a cell phone so you can stay in touch. A personal emergency response system may also help put your mind at ease.

Care for your relative

- Investigate available eldercare resources in the community, which might include: friendly visiting, meals on wheels, volunteer driver programs, accessible transportation, recreational programs and home healthcare services. Take advantage of respite services such as day care programs and nursing facilities that offer short-term residential care.
- If finances permit, hire a personal support worker or companion for your relative so you can get out more often.

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