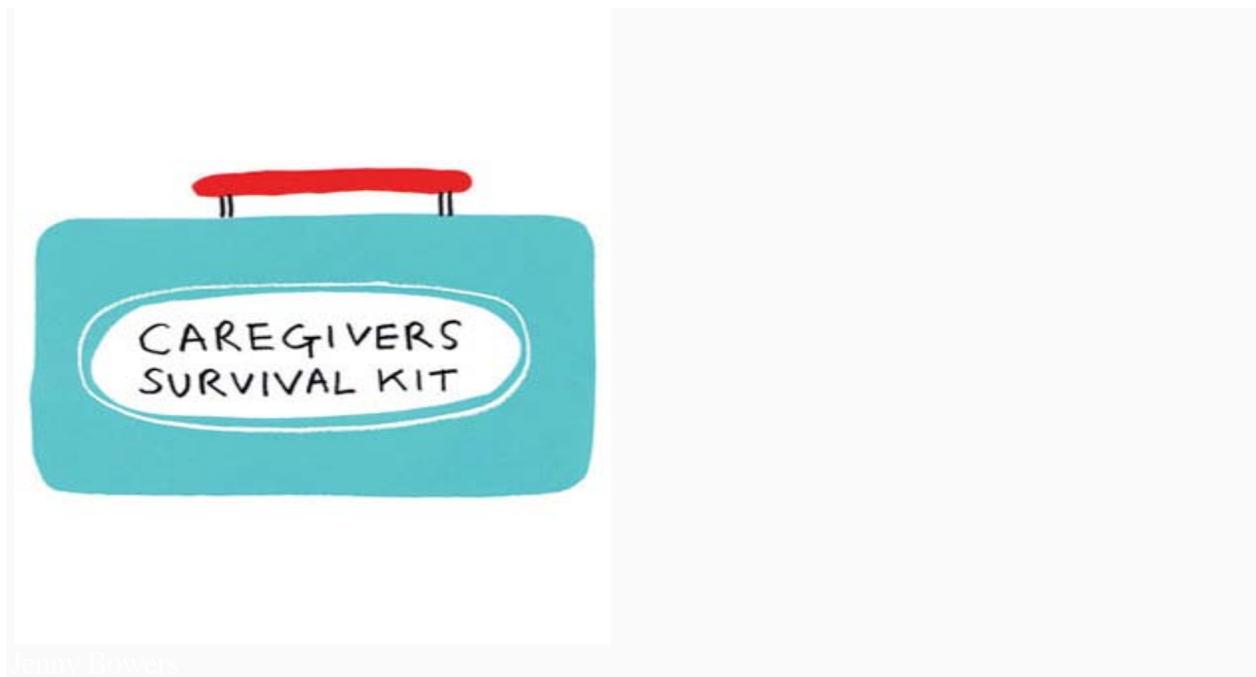


The Caregivers Survival Guide

Learn how to endure the demands of guiding a loved one through illness

BY [GAIL SHEEHY](#)



You can only care for another person as well as you care for yourself. Imagine yourself as a parent on a faltering plane. When the oxygen masks drop, you put yours on first, then your child's. The same thing goes for a caregiver. To be a good care manager, you need to take care of your own health.

Keep your routine.

If you normally get up and stretch and shower before sipping coffee as you get dressed and watch the news, don't stop. Even if you're more anxious about catching the doctor than catching up with the latest world crisis, stick with what's most familiar. It will calm you and your family, especially if you still have children living at home.



KEEP STRESS OUT OF YOUR MARRIAGE

Get serious about self-care.



Don't skip your regular checkups! Make sure you get your annual exam and tell your doctor you're caring for a sick loved one. Even better, ask to have your necessary tests performed at the same medical center where you take your loved one and try to schedule them on the same day. *Photo: Thinkstock*

Find an enjoyable physical pursuit.

I know, I know—you've had it drummed into your head to exercise! But do find a form of exercise you enjoy— whether it's swimming, walking, biking, dancing or watching a movie while walking or jogging on a treadmill. Exercise increases the production of powerful feel-good endorphins, which can counteract the stress hormones that your body is probably producing more of.

Reward yourself.



Make a list of the little things you enjoy—whether it's getting a manicure, having a latte and reading the paper at the local coffee shop or even shopping— and commit to doing one every day. You need to take a break from the anxiety and reward yourself for the superb care you give your loved one. Above all, don't feel guilty about wanting to feel good. *Photo: Thinkstock*

Breathe!

Whenever we're anxious, our breathing becomes shallow and our lungs never quite fully inflate. So there isn't enough force to carry oxygen around to all of the cells in our body that are hungry for regeneration. This deprives the brain of the antistress hormones it needs to function calmly and clearly. Just 10 minutes of slow, deep meditative breathing will help slow your heart rate, calm your emotional state and make it easier to think clearly. Whenever you feel overwhelmed by caregiving responsibilities, take time out to sit calmly and do this.

Watch out for symptoms of depression.



Caring for a sick or aging loved one can be draining— and that's completely normal. Unfortunately, it can also pave the way for depression; those caring for someone with dementia are thought to be especially vulnerable. In fact, the Family Caregiver Alliance surveyed California caregivers of adults with chronic health problems and found that 45 percent of them had symptoms of depression. Even more reason to take steps to protect your health. Signs of a potential problem: Are you unable to sleep (or are you sleeping too much)? Do you have no appetite (or are you eating all the time)? Do you feel pessimistic about the future? Do you no longer enjoy activities you once did, like going to the movies or socializing with friends? If any of these symptoms have persisted for more than two weeks, it's time to at least consult a doctor or therapist. *Photo: Thinkstock*

Gail Sheehy is the author of Passages in Caregiving: Turning Chaos into Confidence.