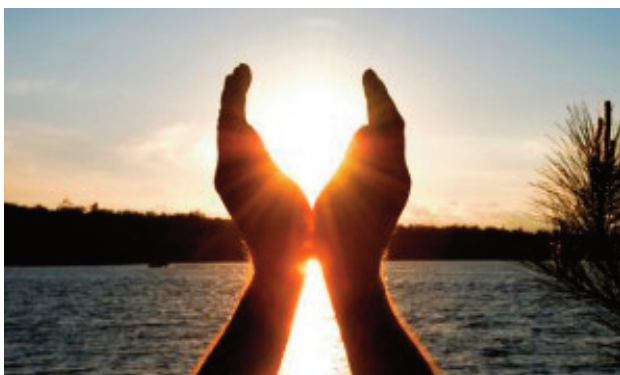


Talking gets it off our chest. When we put our feelings into words, we bring them to the surface. So call feelings by their rightful names: *"I am frightened."* *"I am heartbroken."* *"I am aching."* Say these words out loud. As we release pent-up emotions, we may be draining unbearable hurt from our heart and soul.

We may cry out in disbelief: "It can't be happening." We may cry out in horror: "What happens if my loved one doesn't get better?" We may cry out in fear: "It's not fair." We may cry out in remorse: "If I only had..." Crying is a healthy way for both men and women to express sadness, dissolve tension, and release anxiety.

When we find it difficult to express our feelings publicly, we might wish to write them down. As we unburden ourselves, we may unlock layers of feelings and give our reflections a voice. If we use a computer, let our thoughts flow from our head, down our arms, through the keyboard to the screen. We may start just by completing sentences like: "When you first became ill..." "There are times when..." "If only..." "I need..." For good reason, journal-keeping has been called a paper psychiatrist.



### Seek Out Friends

Having friends during these stressful times will mean a great deal. Choose and seek out those friends who will listen to how we feel and not

tell us how we should feel; who continue to call and visit us even when we are in a miserable mood; who help us have fun and relax, and who offer nonjudgmental, compassionate support. Tell them how much they've helped and how much we appreciate their interest and concern.

### Your Own Spiritual Concerns

When crises shatter life, and anxiety and grief become the fabric of our days, our faith may be challenged. God may seem too distant to help us. We may rage at God. We may think that God is punishing us, but sickness has nothing to do with rewards and punishments. Blaming God is a natural, normal response to extreme anguish. Many have felt this way, including the psalmist who said (Psalm 22:2): "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?" It's okay to be angry at God. God can take it.

Yet, our spirituality may somehow be strengthened through this painful struggle. Faith may help us accept the unacceptable and give us courage and compassion as we support our loved one through the illness. Through prayers, simple or formal, we can release our feelings and our secret concerns and fears. In the darkness of our anguish, we may discover a measure of solace and peace, a sense that even as we struggle, we do not struggle alone.

# Caring for Yourself When Caring for Others

[www.baycrest.org](http://www.baycrest.org)



Adapted from *"Caring for Yourself When You are Caring for Someone Who is Ill"* by Rabbi Earl A. Grollman Spitz and used with permission from Jewish Lights Publishing

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## Illness Affects All Involved

We naturally direct attention to those who are infirmed and hospitalized. Unfortunately, we place little emphasis on the caregivers who are too often forgotten as they deal with their own private fears, sadness, emptiness and bewilderment. The ebb and flow of changes caused by illness affect not only the people who are sick but also the lives of everyone entrusted to their care.

If we are the ones hovering over an ailing loved one, we may be suffering in silence. We may be emotionally, spiritually, and physically overloaded. We know that if we collapse under the strain, we will not be as effective as we would like to be in supporting someone who so desperately needs us. The question is: How do we find the equilibrium to give to ourselves at the same time as we need to give so much to another person?

## Your Own Physical Health

Our loved one is sick, and yet we can't remember the last time that we felt good. Our head throbs. Our stomach aches. We go to bed exhausted, but then can't fall asleep. These physical problems are real. It is estimated that 75% of routine visits to doctors are stress related. And one of the greatest causes of stress is caring for a sick loved one. An aching

heart takes a toll on the rest of our body.

Of God's 613 commandments, 213 are of a medical nature. The philosopher, Rabbi Moses Maimonides (1138-1204) emphasized the importance of cultivating those habits that are conducive to health and vigor. No responsibility is more demanding than caring for someone we love who is sick. But we will destroy ourselves if we attempt to devote every minute of each day to vigilant watchfulness.

More than ever, we must try to stay healthy. Don't skip meals. Exercise regularly to release pent-up feelings. Try to get sufficient sleep. We must maintain our health if we are to take care of our beloved effectively. Don't become a martyr. If we are consumed by our loved one's needs, we neglect ourselves and other significant people.

It is imperative that we acknowledge and respect our own needs. Heed the voice of the child inside us: "I'm important, too!" Respond with kindness and understanding. We are more than a caregiver. We are ourselves, with our own needs and demands. Have a complete physical checkup. If we share our feelings and fears with our doctor, and not only our medical problems, our bodily distress may begin to diminish.



Our need includes rest. Try to find quiet time for ourselves each day: go for a walk and behold the majesty of nature; close our eyes and listen to music, and let its notes transport us to another world; spend a little time in a tranquil place, even for just a "five-minute vacation." Slow down. Relinquish responsibility.

There is a healing in solitude. A little withdrawal from the constant tension allows us to return to our beloved refreshed, renewed, restored. The peace that we find will make us better caregivers.



## Your Emotional Health

Understand the possible physical and emotional consequences caused by the loss of health: disbelief, numbness, hostility, anger, guilt, depression. These are normal adaptive responses. The more our life is bound up with our beloved, the more vulnerable we are to these feelings. With conflicting emotions, we may feel like the victim of a sudden windstorm, swept away by forces we didn't expect and can't control.

Feelings are neither good nor bad; they just are. There is not right way to express emotions or a prescribed time it will take to adjust. Feel free to feel. Accepting our emotions as natural will help us resolve them. Fear of the future is real. Don't keep it a secret.