

The Area Agency on Aging & Disabilities of Southwest Washington's Caregiver Corner

Taking A Guilt-Free Break From Pandemic Caregiving, by Barry J. Jacobs, Psy.D

One thing that's true about family caregiving is that, even when it's rewarding, it isn't easy. But during the Covid crisis, caring for loved ones and keeping them safe has never been harder or more important. Family caregivers are feeling the pressure. A recent Rosalyn Carter Institute for Caregiving survey of over 400 caregivers found that 83% of them have felt more stressed during the pandemic and 42% said that other family members are no longer around to help.

Many of these caregivers also feel both isolated and guilty. They want to leave the house but are afraid they'll bring home the deadly virus and harm their loved ones. As a result, many of them have avoided going out for months, cutting themselves off from favorite activities and sources of support.

No family caregiver can continue forever without taking care of themselves, pandemic or not. Here are ideas for taking a guilt-free break:

Take a break in the house: In most cases, it isn't necessary for a family caregiver to be joined at the hip to a care receiver round-the-clock—even if that's what the care receiver prefers. Most caregivers can leave the TV on and go to a different room to read, exercise or talk on the phone as a quick break within earshot of their loved one.

Take a break in your mind: Nor is it usually required to pay close attention to the care receiver all the time. We can go into our own mental worlds and still be physically present by listening to soothing music or a good book through ear buds while the person we are caring for is within view. Or we can use deep breathing, meditation, guided imagery and other so-called mindfulness practices to make us calmer while we still keep watch on what our care receiver is doing.

Check out nature: The natural world, even seen from a window, can be inspiring. We can observe the growing green plants and the brightly colored birds. We can listen closely to the sound of the wind in the trees on a breezy day. Even if our loved one can't enjoy the world's beauty any longer, we still can and feel refreshed.

Find social support: Humans are generally social beings who become stronger when they see others regularly. No hard-working caregiver should attempt to convince herself she should give up on social connections. There is a range of ways to socialize during the pandemic that are generally safe: writing letters or emails; having phone calls or video chats; arranging for masked and socially distant front porch or outdoors get-togethers. A happier caregiver who knows that others remember and care about her will make for a better cared-for and happier care receiver.

Contact the Area Agency on Aging and Disabilities of Southwest Washington at 360-694-8144 or IAClark@dshs.wa.gov to learn more about supports available to family caregivers. Article content is provided by Family Caregiver Alliance.