

Striking Balance: The Caregiver and Work

By Heather Clarke-Peckerman

Elder Care

Providing care for a family member in need is a centuries-old act of kindness, love, and loyalty. Caregivers are a diverse group of people of all ages and from all walks of life - some new to caregiving, some just anticipating becoming caregivers and others for whom providing care has become a way of life.

For 15 years, I watched my mother take care of my grandmother, and saw the emotional, physical and financial toll it had on her. My mom promised her mother that she would never put her in a nursing home. Although that was a noble promise, I don't think anyone was prepared for what that would entail.

Although it was difficult to watch my grandmother's health fade, it was just as difficult to watch the toll it took on my mom. It was not until the last year of my grandmother's life that my mom accepted help by hiring a live-in caregiver. After years of providing care, my mom showed signs of depression and frustration.

For working caregivers, your weight is much heavier. For you, it is extremely important to maintain balance so burning out at home or work does not occur. As a caregiver, finding time for positive, nurturing interactions with others might seem impossible. Yet, you owe it to yourself to find time for you. The best present you can give your loved one is your own good health.

As human beings, we are emotional bank accounts. We need emotional deposits and withdrawals. Caregivers tend to allow others to withdraw too much energy from them, leaving them feeling empty, tired and resentful. The key to attaining balance is having just as many emotional deposits as withdrawals. Emotional deposits are activities that bring you pleasure and allow others to help you. If you continually have too many withdrawals and not enough deposits, you will experience caregiver burnout - putting you and your loved one's health at risk. The key is putting in the big rocks first, everyday. The three core caregiver rocks are health, boundaries and respite. Practice incorporating all three into your life on a daily basis, and you will feel more centered, balanced and relaxed.

For more information regarding work/life balance, contact Heather Clarke-Peckerman, president of the HCP Consulting Group, can be reached at hcpconsulting@verizon.net.



Here are some vital tips for both the caregiver and their companies:

Caregiver Tips:

- Incorporate activities that give you pleasure - Make time for your hobbies (like reading, music, etc.).
- Respite time (baths, tea, alone time) - Create boundaries that allow you time to rejuvenate and find inner strength.
- Balanced diet - Eat a diet that provides energy.
- Contact with others (support groups, friends, and family) - Take mini-breaks from all the pressures you are facing.
- Exercise (walks) - When you exercise you feel good, and when you feel good, you are more alert and ready to handle the day's challenges.
- Learn - Educate yourself on your loved one's condition so you can create realistic expectations.

Employer Tips:

- Flexible work schedule - Whenever possible, allow for flextime so your employee can manage both work and home demands.
- Company support group - Create an internal support group to allow employees to vent and validate their feelings.
- Encourage health - Encourage employees to walk during lunch or use the company gym, if available.
- Lunch and Learns - Bring in guest speakers to talk about caregiver issues over lunch.
- Look for signs of burnout - Irritability, depression, frustration are just a few signs of caregiver burnout. If necessary, refer your employee to the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) Department.