

How Older Adults and Their Family Caregivers Can Integrate Daily Self Care

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• Family Caregivers Can Integrate Daily Self Care



Most experts agree self care is the core behavior of a healthy lifestyle for people of all ages. While self-care definitions vary, in simple terms, self care is defined as any action people initiate or perform on their own behalf that maintains or improves physical, mental, and/or spiritual wellbeing. As a family caregiver, self care did not come naturally for me. During a frequent six-hour drive to help care for my parents with multiple chronic diseases, intentional self care presented itself as the antidote for everything and everyone crumbling around me. Sadly, for my parents, a healthy turnaround was unlikely at their advanced physical stages. Yet, I knew there was more I could do to course correct my life which would have present and future impacts on everyone around me, including my care recipients and my children.

Emotional Cost of Caregiving

Caregiving remains the most difficult thing I have ever done, mostly due to the emotional fatigue. According to a recent stress survey for family caregivers, 80 percent of survey respondents said their stress level is a 4 out of 5. Sources of their stress include missing their “old life” (prior to caregiving), lack of sleep, no breaks, not enough help, and not enough time (Care Years Academy, 2020). Resiliency to coping with stress appears to improve with age. In comparison to younger respondents, adults over the age of fifty are more likely to report not feeling stressed (Keenan, 2019).

While older adults may feel less stressed, their aging cells negatively impact the body’s natural stress response. Bouncing back physically can take longer, particularly for an older adult who is sedentary or dealing with a chronic disease (Harvard Medical School, 2016). On a global scale, when every person assumes responsibility for his or her own health and happiness, society wins. Self care plays an integral part in achieving the World Health Organization’s “triple billion” goals by 2023 — a billion people added to universal health coverage, better protection from health emergencies, and better health and wellbeing (Narasimhan, 2019). However, taking time for self care can be difficult for both older adults and their caregivers. Caregiving and aging can both take an emotional toll on an individual. Family caregivers often experience one or more of these common emotions (Schempp, 2014):

- anger,
- anxiety,
- irritability,
- depression,
- fear,
- grief,
- guilt,
- impatience,
- jealousy,
- loneliness,
- resentment, and
- tiredness.

Of these emotions, depression is also common among older adults. Feelings of sadness can come about from the death of a loved one, transitioning from work to retirement, or coping with a health issue (National Institute on Aging, 2017). Incorporating regular and intentional self-care habits will help alleviate and prevent feelings of depression in older adults, and emotional and physical burnout in their caregivers. Self care can even be a shared activity between caregivers and their care recipients. Taking

outdoor walks, playing games, enjoying old photos, and listening to music are examples of activities which can be enjoyed together.

Seven Steps of Self Care

Whether for a family caregiver or an older adult, self care is easier to discuss than to put into practice. In my situation, self care became an intentional habit by taking a photo of something happy or healthy I was doing each day – such as drinking more water, trying a meditation app, journaling, or enjoying a family movie night. In hindsight, these seven steps of self care surfaced and have allowed me to help fast-track others, who are currently on a road to burnout, to a healthier and happier path. Having a pragmatic plan of attack moves an individual from self-care paralysis toward a lifestyle where self care is integrated daily. The action-step methodology outlined below encourages small, incremental, and daily behavior modifications which, when added up, have a significant impact on oneself and surrounding individuals. These are the seven incremental steps to help integrate self care into daily life and support healthy aging:

1. Evaluate Time Spent
2. Identify a Wellness Objective
3. Choose a Physical Activity
4. Incorporate More Healthy Food Choices
5. Nurture Mental Health
6. Collaborate for Success
7. Celebrate the Win

Completing each step in the order shown helps inform the behaviors and actions of subsequent steps.

Evaluate Time Spent

Many individuals attempt to skip this first step; however, it is foundational and essential to integrating self care into a lifelong routine. “Finding” time for personal self care is a myth. Caregivers and older adults must create pockets of time by delegating, eliminating, and simplifying tasks. The good news is this recommended assessment of time activity takes less than an hour and all the answers are known. Paper, pen, personal calendar, and a to-do list are all the necessary items to complete this activity.

Using the supplies, draw a simple table on the piece of paper with the days of the week along the top and the hours of the day along the side. Next, label the blocks of time spent on different activities each day for a week into the table. Include sleep, meals, personal care, work, caregiving, shopping, housework, and other regular commitments.

Highlight the activities which could potentially be delegated or eliminated. Candidates for delegation include anything where personal expertise or strengths are not essential, such as housekeeping, carpooling, or grocery shopping. Eliminate anything which does not align with core values. Perhaps the time is right for volunteer commitments to be sidelined; the homeowner's association or church committee could benefit from a fresh perspective. On the table, star anything which is a current self-care activity. Recall the feelings associated with these activities and the direct impact they may have on the surrounding activities. These are the exact feelings to deliberately take action to multiply. Identify blocks of time in the week where opportunities exist for more self-care activities.

Create some general guidelines around time-stealing and sedentary activities such as watching television, browsing social media, and responding to email. Repurposing some of this precious time for pastimes which further boost health and happiness may provide longer-lasting benefits.

Identify a Wellness Objective

Each day consists of twenty-four hours and is made up of incremental choices. Every person knows which self-care activities will provide sustenance and energy for herself. For example, some people crave human interaction, and some are thirsty for more time alone. Both have individual health benefits. Start with focusing on one wellness objective at a time. Select a healthy objective which could be considered a slight stretch but is certainly attainable. Some examples would be to: average seven hours of sleep, achieve a desired lab test level, learn a new language for a dream vacation, build strong muscles by lifting a certain amount of weight, or walk a specified distance. Share the defined objective with trusted friends and family so it becomes real.

Identify the small behaviors which, when implemented, will achieve progress toward the objective. Scheduling the related self-care time on a shared family calendar will solidify the commitment and reinforce the new habits and behaviors, especially at the beginning. Work breaks can also be considered self-care opportunities and can be scheduled on a work calendar. Respect this scheduled time as if it were any critical health appointment. Self care cannot be outsourced and missed sessions cannot be made up.

When caring for others during these scheduled sessions, assistance will need to be arranged. For at least a few hours each day, dismiss any feelings of guilt while focusing on personal health and happiness. This self-care objective not only has a positive outcome



for the individual but also has a noticeable positive ripple effect on interpersonal relationships. Take note of the feelings and benefits that surface while working toward the objective. Notice the positive outcomes related to anxiety, sleep, and energy levels. As daily self-care practices mature, consider layering additional self-care activities and objectives into the routine.

Identifying the wellness objective can influence healthy boundaries around what may not be a valuable use of time. Saying “yes” to one activity also requires saying “no” to something else.

Choose a Physical Activity

Less than half of the older population considers themselves to be in very good health or regularly engages in physical activity (Administration for Community Living, 2018). For significant health benefits, adults require between three and five hours of activity a week (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018). Examples of common activities incorporated into a healthy lifestyle include walking, cycling, dancing, swimming, tennis, or golf. Considering how time was spent in younger years can inform a current activity choice. For example, if riding a bicycle outdoors would be difficult due to living restrictions or weather barriers, a stationary bike at home may be an option.

Motivation to keep up with physical activity can come from multiple places. Music can be a huge boost. Enjoy this new wellbeing time even more by creating a special workout playlist or ask friends and family for access to their playlists. Other motivators include trying a new activity, purchasing new workout clothes, committing to a short-term fitness challenge, or inviting a friend along. Some individuals use the power of pairing activities such as only watching a show while walking on their home treadmill.

Baby steps count. Small tweaks to move more in

each day add up, such as walking the dog, taking the stairs, parking further away, and taking a walk while talking on the phone. Schedule the physical activity time on a shared calendar. Many find stacking habits together in morning or evening routines to be beneficial.

Incorporate More Healthy Food Choices

Along with physical activity, healthy eating also reduces the risk of non-communicable disease and it is never too late for an individual to start making diet improvements (International Self-Care Foundation, n.d.). One in five Americans is a family caregiver and as these numbers increase, their health is declining (National Alliance of Caregiving, 2020). Healthy eating will help turn this around; a mindset switch may be needed. Instead of focusing on potential feelings of deprivation, aim to eat foods rich in nutrients to boost immunity and increase energy levels. Notice the changes that occur when eating better.

To ensure success, concentrate on improvements in the home environment. Read nutrition labels and purge items which detract from the wellness objective or truly do not fuel the body. Adopting a habit of reading nutrition labels and eliminating unhealthy foods will contribute to an overall better health condition, particularly among our aging population (Narasimhan et al., 2019). If sugary, high-calorie food items are desired by others in the household, designate a spot just for them.

Creating a weekly meal plan and doing some quick preparation after returning from the grocery store will set the week up for success. One oversized salad without dressing can be divided into several mason jars and kept fresh in the refrigerator for several days. Double a healthy dinner recipe and freeze half or enjoy it twice that week. Portion out servings of nuts, fruits, and vegetables so they are easy to grab and go. This is a good example of a task others can help with. Know the personal pitfalls and prepare meals and snacks in advance to help make better choices and keep tempting items out of reach. Certainly, enjoy a few treats in moderation.

Nurture Mental Health

While giving attention to physical activity and nutrition are important steps in integrating successful self-care behaviors, mental health stability is also essential. Both family caregivers and their care recipients confirmed their mental health continued to decline due to the COVID-19 pandemic with diminished support from professional and private care teams, reduced respite and daycare services, and lack of in-person social interaction. For some, this change in their personal wellbeing has negatively affected the

relationship between the caregiver and the care recipient (Rosalynn Carter Institute, 2020).

The effects of stress have mental and physical impacts such as headaches, insomnia, muscle tension, upset stomach, or complications from addictive behavior (American Institute of Stress, n.d.). Incorporating relaxation techniques can help manage stress. Activities such as massage, meditation, naps, yoga, nature walks, or journaling can restore calm and reduce anxiety.

Self-perceptions around value and worth can be changed by surrounding oneself with people who are supportive and uplifting. Limit individuals and technology that steal your joy. Incorporate a mindset of continual learning and growing such as watching documentaries, reading books, or listening to podcasts. Signing up for a recurring class or lesson can also help create a new healthy habit and reduce feelings of isolation. People are less likely to cancel scheduled activities for which they paid.

Collaborate for Success

Hard things are achievable but doing them alone is unnecessary. The benefits of social connection include increased happiness, better health, and a longer life (Mental Health America, n.d.). Support teams often consist of close friends and family. Broaden the caring tribe by including members from a support group, neighborhood faith community, or activity club. Beyond human bonds, technology options can increase peace of mind, collaboration, and communication. Countless smartphone applications can motivate more movement, better sleep, and shared responsibilities. Simplify and streamline as many processes as possible or ask someone who enjoys technology to lend a hand.

When caring for others, advocate for their independence. While it may be easier to just complete the task, depriving growing children and aging family members of accomplishing a task themselves can impact their activity level, mental health, and self worth. Become more vulnerable and express feelings and frustrations so others are aware of the ways they can specifically help. Expecting someone to know when assistance is needed is not productive. Instead, create a list of the tasks which others could accomplish and have it readily available. Lawn care, shopping, companionship for a loved one, or extra funds for personal or home care are a few options.

Celebrate the Win

Once the previous six steps have been acted upon, notice the significant improvements which have been made. Seek joy and gratitude even in the smallest

routine and behavioral changes. Give some grace if this self-care journey has been harder than imagined. Life is messy and much is out of direct control. Focus on what is controllable. As the self-care journey evolves, celebrate the minor and major accomplishments. However, do not allow the reward to detract from positive new behaviors. Healthy rewards may include cooking a special meal, a home spa day, spending time in nature, reading, or sleeping in.

Planning, starting small, focusing on one behavior at a time, involving others, and seeking support will help family caregivers and older adults make lasting lifestyle improvements (American Psychological Association, 2010). Start with assessing how time is currently spent and highlight where self-care opportunities do exist. Then, define an initial, healthy objective which drives motivation and excitement. Incorporate the necessary physical activity, healthy nutrition, and mental health habits which will allow this new self-care journey to become a reality. Enlist the help of friends, family, and a reliable support system and everyone wins: the individual, their loved ones, and the community. Investing in personal health and happiness reaps strong dividends for all. •CSA



Elizabeth Miller is a family caregiver, Certified Caregiving Consultant, and founder of HappyHealthyCaregiver.com. Through her speaking, consulting, and online resources, Elizabeth helps family caregivers integrate caregiving and self care with their busy lives. She is the host of the Happy Healthy Caregiver podcast on the Whole Care Network, author of *Just for You: A Daily Self-Care Journal*, and facilitates an Atlanta caregiver support group called the Atlanta Daughterhood Circle.

RESOURCES

Alzheimer's Association: A list of 50 meaningful indoor and outdoor activities a family member can enjoy doing with a person with dementia: <https://www.alz.org/help-support/resources/kids-teens/50-activities>

Carebirds: A smartphone app which helps family caregivers alleviate some of the stress of caregiving by providing one place to coordinate care, manage medications, assign to-dos, and schedule appointments. <https://www.carebirdsapp.com/>

Happy Healthy Caregiver: Creative and intentional ideas to incorporate daily physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual self care : <https://happyhealthycaregiver.com/the-abcs-of-self-care-sing-them-throughout-self-care-awareness-month/>

MindTools: Activity log template to help assess how time is currently being spent and identify pockets of time to be repurposed for health and wellbeing: https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_03.htm

Shika Anuar: Seven self-care worksheets for adults including a self-

care action plan, self-care bingo, and bullet journal template: <https://shikahanuar.com/blog/self-care-worksheets-fo-adults>

Whole Care Network: A library of podcasts to encourage and support family caregivers and older adults: <https://www.thewholecarenetwork.com/>

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