

Managing Caregiver Guilt

Guilt is an especially common reaction in caregiving. Guilt can manipulate you into giving more than is good for your own health and make it seem as though all you have done and continue to do, is never enough. If you're the kind of person prone to guilt, learn to manage guilt so that guilt serves you rather than imprisons you.



Guilt like any other emotion has a purpose. It says "Pay attention." Just as the physical pain of a burned finger says, "pull your hand off the stove," guilt steers the choices and actions you are making as you care give. And like all emotions, it can greatly impact your own health.

Here are some tips for managing your caregiver guilt:

- ✓ Recognize the feeling of guilt: Unrecognized guilt eats at your soul. Name it; look at the monster under the bed.
- ✓ Identify other feelings: Often, there are feelings under the feeling of guilt. Name those, too. For example, say to yourself: "I hate to admit this to myself, but I'm resentful that Dad's illness changed all of our lives." Once you put it into words, you will have a new perspective.
- ✓ Be compassionate with yourself: Cloudy moods, like cloudy days, come and go. There's no one way a caregiver should feel. When you give yourself permission to have any feeling, and recognize that your feelings don't control your actions, your guilt will subside.
- ✓ Look for the cause of the guilt: What is the mismatch between this "PERFECT YOU" image you are fantasizing and the real you? Do you have an unmet need? Do you need to change your actions so that they align with your values?
- ✓ Take action: Needs are not bad or good; they just are. If you need some time alone, find someone to be with your loved one.
- ✓ Find a strategy: For example, Clara felt guilty because her friend was in the hospital and she didn't send a card. She bought a box of beautiful blank cards to make it easier for her to drop a note the next time.
- ✓ Ask for help: Call a friend and say, "I'm going through a hard time. Do you have a few minutes just to listen?"
- ✓ Revisit and reinvent the "PERFECT YOU" image: You made the best choices based on your resources and knowledge at the time.
- ✓ Understand that you will be a more effective caregiver when you care for the caregiver first. Loved ones neither want nor should expect a selfless servant. As a caregiver, when you care for yourself, you increase and improve your own caring.