

# Caregiver's

## HOME COMPANION

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H E L P I N G   T H O S E   W H O   H E L P   O T H E R S

# Staying Fit While Caregiving

## You May Think It's Impossible, But It's Not

By Lori Zanteson

Just what you need, one more thing to add to your already jammed caregiving agenda. But if you don't find a way to fit in your own fitness, both you and your loved one will suffer.

It's a fact that while caregiving certainly is a labor of love, it will take its toll if you let it. That's why caregivers have higher rates of depression, anxiety, sleep problems, high blood pressure and compromised immunity, according to the 2002 Stanford Report. So, as grim as it sounds, this is reality, and caregivers need to get moving—physically moving, that is.

Experts note that exercise provides both mental and physical benefits, including improved fitness and strength, better sleep, decreased depression, anxiety and pain. And for caregivers, they must take care of their own health to ensure they can continue fulfilling their crucial caregiving role.

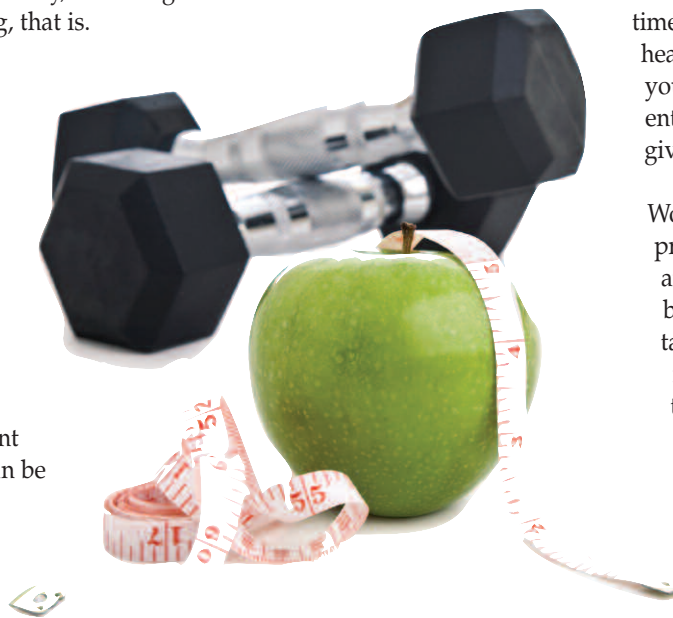
### Putting Yourself First

There should be no misunderstanding that exercise is one of the most important things we can do for ourselves. Yet it can be so difficult to take the time to exercise when caregiving doesn't seem to allow extra time for anything, let

alone ourselves. The truth is there never will be enough time to get everything done, so you need to make some time just for you.

While a caregiver's schedule is overwhelming, focusing solely on the care recipient denies your own needs. This will inevitably backfire by leading to problems that aren't good for the caregiver or the care recipient. Illness, depression and even burnout can occur and may lead to a let-down in care. Remember that taking time for yourself will help you avoid health problems, feel better about yourself, and build more energy and enthusiasm to help you continue to give care.

Carol Marak, the founder of WorkingCaregiver.com, knows the pressures of juggling a full time job and caring for her parents. The benefits of exercise are so important, she says, there should be no reason for a caregiver to avoid taking time out from caregiving responsibilities. Several options may be explored, such as church support groups that provide free respite for caregivers, local senior citizens services, and ►



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**One of the most important reasons for caregivers to exercise is to ensure they don't experience the same challenges as the aging parents they care for.**

—Lori Peppi Michiel, a certified personal trainer for caregivers and the elderly.

**Staying Fit While Caregiving**

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the Area Agencies on Aging, which is funded by the federal government and provides free respite as part of its caregiver support.

**How Much is Enough?**

The Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommends 60–90 minutes a day of cumulative activity which includes exercise and general activities. If you're thinking you will never even find one 20-minute block of time, don't worry! Research shows three 10-minute workouts of moderate to intense activity are just as effective as 30 consecutive minutes.

The goal is to include movements that use major muscle groups and burn calories, like house cleaning or yard work. For a caregiver, it may include lifting the wheelchair into and out of the car or walking from the parking lot to the hospital several times a week. Give yourself credit for what you already do and then aim for more progress. Some easy ways to increase daily activity are to kick your usual activities up a notch by increasing the pace and intensity to get your heart pumping faster.

One of the most important reasons for caregivers to exercise, says Lori Peppi Michiel, a certified personal trainer in Woodland Hills, California, is to ensure they don't experience the same challenges as the aging parents they care for. Michiel, who has served the elderly and their families for 25 years, has seen the results of a generation that didn't value exercise as we do today. As a result, they suffer from stiff joints, obesity, and all sorts of other health problems common to society today.

**Use It or Lose It**

When it comes to our bodies, the old adage, "If you don't use it, you will lose it" is very accurate says Michiel, who explains that "we lose 1.5% of muscle strength (or seven pounds of strength every decade) each year from peak strength in early adulthood." Michiel encourages caregivers to stretch every day. It not only feels good, it will improve circulation, range of motion, reduce muscle tension, and improve your ability to relax.

Even if you are homebound, there are ways to get your body moving and your heart pump-

ing. James R. Sherman, author of Positive Caregiver Attitudes suggests scheduling exercise time early in the morning before the care recipient wakes up. Research shows that early risers are more likely to stick with an exercise program. In addition, this time is vital because it equips you to take on the responsibilities of the day.

This also is a good time to find early morning workout programs on television or to pop in your own video/DVD. The exercise video market is plump with variety, and most anyone can find something appealing. Later on, include the care recipient, if you can. Whether it's moving to some jazzy tunes or pushing the wheelchair on a beautiful day, this will enhance both of your moods.

**Explore Your Options**

If you can get out, plan active outings like a scenic walk or a trip to the zoo. Always keep a pair

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**FITTING IN FITNESS**

**These tips may help you figure out the best ways to fit in enough time for your own exercise:**

**Try AM Exercise.** There are few distractions, and research shows morning exercisers are more likely to stick with it.

**Add Gusto to Chores.** Quicken the pace when you scrub the sink, or use a push mower to burn more calories.

**Make TV Minutes Burn.** Lift dumbbells, ride the stationary bike or walk a treadmill during favorite TV shows. Or just get moving during commercials!

**Include Your Loved One.** Play music and move. Get outdoors for a walk. Bring the dog too.

**Peer Pressure.** Join a walking or dance club or even a sports league where others depend on you to participate.

**Active Fun.** Plan activities and trips that require you to walk, like to a park or at a mall.

**Be Prepared.** Keep a comfortable pair of shoes and a jacket in your car, in case you see an opportunity for a few laps around the grocery store or hospital.

**Pencil It In.** Schedule time to do the exercise video, take the dog for a walk, or hike with a friend.

things that were illogical and irrational... at times.

I also didn't understand that dementia doesn't mean stupid at all (a concept that is not widely appreciated), and that he was still socially adjusted to never show his hidden side to anyone outside the family. Even with the onset of dementia, it was absolutely amazing he could still be so manipulative and crafty. On the other hand, my mother was as sweet and lovely as she'd always been.

### Balancing Brain Chemistry

Alzheimer's is just one type of dementia (making up 60–65% of all dementias), and there's no stopping the progression nor is there yet a cure. However, if identified early there are medications that in most people can mask/slow the progression of the disease, keeping a person in the early (independent) stage longer and delaying full-time supervision and nursing home care.

In my case, after treating the dementia, and the (often-present) depression in both parents, the doctor prescribed a small dose of anti-aggression medication for my father, which helped smooth out his volatile temper without making him sleep all day. It wasn't easy and not perfect, but once their brain chemistries were better balanced, I was able to optimize nutrition and fluid intake with much less resistance.

I was also able to implement creative behavioral techniques to cope with the bizarre behaviors. Instead of logic and reason, I learned to use distraction, redirection and reminiscence. Instead of arguing the facts, I validated their frustrated feelings and lived in their reality of the moment. I learned to just "go with the flow" with whatever was being said. And, if none of that worked, the promise of vanilla ice cream worked the best to get my father into the shower, even as he swore a blue streak at me that he'd just taken one yesterday (which was actually over a week ago)! ■

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*Jacqueline Marcell is an author, publisher, radio host, national speaker, and advocate for eldercare awareness and reform. Her writing includes *Elder Rage*, or *Take My Father ... Please! How to Survive Caring for Aging Parents*. For more information, see [www.ElderRage.com](http://www.ElderRage.com). Also visit her Internet radio program at [www.wsradio.com/coping-withcaregiving](http://www.wsradio.com/coping-withcaregiving).*

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of shoes in the car in case an opportunity to walk comes up. Don't overlook even the most unlikely occasion to sneak in a brisk, heart-pumping walk like during your loved one's doctor appointment or when you arrive early for an appointment. A pet dog eager for a walk is great motivation for many caregivers. Forever the caregiver, it feels okay and even necessary to meet your pet's needs even when you won't meet your own. And a dog provides companionship as well as an emotional lift for both you and the care recipient.

Pursue a passion or try something new by joining a group for tennis, walking, golfing, or dance. Vicki, in northern Illinois, carves out 15 minutes each day to practice belly dancing. She enrolled in a class last year with sprains, bumps and bruises from caring for her father who had lost most of his muscle control due to Alzheimer's disease. "I find that belly dance takes me to a place where I can forget all about my dad's disease and death in March of this year," she says. "It literal-

### Coping with Caregiving a Second, or Even Third, Time

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When asked what has gotten her through this time, Gloria says without hesitation, "My love for them—my family. It just makes me want to do it." So whenever you feel that it just isn't fair or you doubt your ability to keep going, try to remember why you do it. Remember those precious moments when you and your loved one share a private joke. Think about the times you spend reminiscing. Cherish the moments when you just sit quietly together.

Chances are you'll also remember how glad you were afterward to have been there for a loved one the last time you were a caregiver, and you'll know that, later on, you'll be glad you were there this time too. ■

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ly saved my life this year."

Caregivers are giving, caring, supportive and above and beyond all else, they are always there. As wonderful and necessary as caregivers are, you must find a release for the sake of your health and that of your loved one. No matter what your situation, with a little effort, you can make it happen. Whether homebound or able to get away even briefly, there are ways to incorporate exercise into your life. Get support. As the TV commercial says, just do it—for you. ■

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### RESOURCES:

Dietary Guidelines for Americans,  
[www.health.gov/dietaryguidelines](http://www.health.gov/dietaryguidelines)

National Association of Area Agencies on Aging,  
[www.n4a.org/](http://www.n4a.org/)

WorkingCaregiver.com,  
[www.workingcaregiver.com/](http://www.workingcaregiver.com/)

Fifty Plus Fitness with Lori Michiel,  
[www.fiftyplusfitness.biz/](http://www.fiftyplusfitness.biz/)

## COMING UP IN JANUARY

- Motivating our loved ones to exercise and stay fit for their own good can seem like you're climbing a sand hill. We'll show you how hopping into an exercise routine with your Mom or Dad can benefit you both.
- Caregiver mental health – taking positive steps before you reach the breaking point.
- Harsh winter weather and elderly skin are not a good mix, whether inside or out. We'll give you tips on keeping loved ones comfortable and their skin healthy.
- How to maintain a high level of personal hygiene when our elderly seem to lose interest. A roadmap for caregivers.