

2/23/2025 SFC Aging Well Workshop: The Secrets to Self-Care for Caregivers by Iryna Ishchenko

Bio

Iryna Ishchenko is a Master Certified Coach who specializes in supporting caregivers through one-on-one or group coaching sessions. Many years ago, Iryna herself went through an extremely difficult caregiving journey when her mom was diagnosed with dementia and terminal cancer, and she had a newborn baby at the same time. Looking back, she realized the importance of finding time as a caregiver. Nevertheless, during the time when she was still caring for her mom and baby, she was confronted with dark thoughts, hatred against her mom, and self-shaming and self-judgement for "being a monster". Even long after her mom passed away, Iryna was still recovering from that PTSD experience. It took Iryna a long time to recover, and during the process, she discovered and invented tools that could have helped her to do things differently, and she is passionate to share her wisdom and knowledge with caregivers who are going through the same tumultuous journey.

Self-Care for the Caregivers

In order to do a good job caring for a loved one, a caregiver needs to care for self first - not only to survive, but also to thrive. But how? A majority of the research on this topic offers very generic advices: healthy diet, better sleep, more exercises, etc. There're also specific suggestions such as art therapy, knitting, etc. But the truth is "there is no universal self-care solution"!

In fact, when polling the audience with the question "how do you take care yourself", every single answer from the audience was unique: take a salt bath, go on a hike, walk alongside the ocean, be intentional about reaching out to important friends, sit near the window on sunny day and have lunch and look out the front lawn and bees.

To figure out what works for you, you need to ask yourself these questions:

1. Was the self-caring need internal or external? Internal means it's a self-identified need, while external means someone told me that this is good for me.
2. What's the true motivation? Are you doing it just for the sake of doing it, or is there a true need?
3. Do I enjoy optimizing my time in order to do the things that I want to do? If not, that can kill the self-care benefit itself.

4. How do you feel when you take care of yourself? Do you feel not productive? Do you feel guilty of not taking care of the person whom you are supposed to?

Ask yourself and listen to yourself what you need right now at this specific moment!! But...

You may be so stressed with everything that you cannot hear yourself. You couldn't hear anything because there is so much anxiety.

Coping Strategies

These are some simple strategies to help you calm down so you can figure out what to do next:

- When you are in an agitated state, take any object and throw the object back and fro between the two hands. One hand is outside the field of vision. Doing so with both hands will activate both sides of the brain and help with blood flow.
- Humming can help activate the body-mind connection nerve. You should feel a slight vibration, and it's the vibration that helps to activate the nerve.
- Scan your body and identify areas where there is tension. This is a common technique to help calm down the brain when the brain is too activated.
 - When you are in a care-giving position, you probably often feel "everyone is against me", "the world is falling apart", etc.
 - First, the exercise begins with establishing an external setting that "I am in a safe environment".
 - Next, establish an internal feeling that "I feel safe".
 - Then, scan body one area at a time (e.g. eye, ear, face, neck, shoulder, chest, lower back, etc.) and find where there is stress. Make physical moment to relieve that part of the body, e.g. dancing
- Name what you are feeling, e.g. "I am grieving", "I am angry"
 - Naming the emotion helps to relieve the emotion.
 - Studies using fMRI scan have shown that just naming the emotion help the area of the brain where it is responsible for that emotion calms down.
 - Name the most positive to the most negative emotions.
- Accept yourself ("this is what I'm feeling right now"), and it's okay ("because I am human").
- Count from 1 to some numbers (low number)!

Reality Check

The relationship between a caregiver and the one receiving care is often strained. You might think either you yourself or the person whom you are caring for or both are horrible people. When this happens, it's important to take a step back and ask these questions:

1. What is really happening with the mind and body of the person whom you are caring for?
2. What are the facts? Is the person really a horrible person?
3. How specifically it affects your situation when you make certain choices?

It's important to not act emotionally, but rather take a breather so you can act more rationally. If you can train yourself to make rational decisions, self-care doesn't have to be a big drain, or a big time commitment.

Finally, caregiving can be very lonely, as other people in your life will start falling off. This is not because they want to abandon you, but people might just not know how to respond, or what they can do to help, etc. As such, if you need help, state something specific, e.g. "I would appreciate it if you can bring some food by on this date."

Q&A

Q: What do you do when you don't know what works for you when it comes to self-care?

A: Just try and experiment/explore. Even if something doesn't work, what else can you do? Will never know until you try.

A: Make a list of self-care ideas.

Q: How do I detach myself from thinking about the caregiving situation while self caring?

A: Let the emotion come. Don't fight it. It comes and goes like waves. It's like meditation. Try to focus something specific.