

Caring for the Caregiver

Care giving is nothing new for Native women. Brothers and sisters have needed help, children have been sick, the family needed to be fed. Caring for someone with cancer, however, is not the same thing. It can be longer term, more difficult than first thought, and can be very tiring. It is not uncommon for caregivers to feel mental and physical exhaustion, with symptoms similar to depression. That's why it's important for a caregiver to take care of herself, so that her own health doesn't suffer too.

Ask for help: Sometimes women think asking for help makes them look weak. It's just the opposite! Your mother/sister/aunt/best friend wants to be needed too! So ask. They'll be happy to bring a casserole over, run some errands for you, or help with the laundry.

Take a break: Go see a movie or out to bingo with a friend. Caregivers need to think about their own needs, too. Pleasant recreation can reduce stress.

Get enough sleep. The advice given to new mothers, "Sleep when the baby sleeps" can be helpful to caregivers, too. If you're short on sleep, nap when your loved one does. The laundry, cleaning, and cooking can wait until you're rested.

Relax. Take a hot sage bath. Light some candles and close the door. These and other relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing and even listening to a favorite song, are effective ways of managing stress.

Set boundaries. Feeling unsure about fulfilling one of your loved one's needs or uncomfortable performing a certain task? Talk to your patient's medical provider to see if there is a professional that can show you some techniques that will help you feel more comfortable. If that's not possible, then...

Join a support group. It's not as scary as it may sound. Sharing your experiences with others can help answer questions you may have. You may discover new ways to cope, or new ways to change a bandage! Ask at your tribal clinic, or your health care facility where your loved one receives cancer treatment, where the nearest group might be. Often transportation is available. Others going through the same thing understand like no one else can—and believe it or not, can even find humor in the most difficult of situations.



Geneva Colorado (Navajo), works out at the Tuba City Family Wellness Center.

Get some exercise. Exercise will give you more energy and improve your mood. Joining a local gym is fine, but even a walk around your neighborhood will help ease your worries.

