



Caring for the Caregivers

Kerry McCarthy, LPC, LAC

“There are only four kinds of people in the world—those who have been caregivers, those who are currently caregivers, those who will be caregivers, and those who will need caregivers.”

— Former First Lady Rosalynn Carter¹

Several years ago, “Jim,” a 60-year-old attorney, sat, tired and disheveled, across from the parole board on behalf of his client. The gray sky and drizzling weather seemed to match his level of motivation and interest as the parole hearing seemed to pass him by. He played his part, said all the right things, objected when appropriate, and advocated for his client. But it was clear the spark had left him years ago. Over the years, Jim’s wife had slowly slipped away from him, suffering from Alzheimer’s disease. Isolation from his family and friends increased as he tried to balance doctors’ appointments, trips to the pharmacy, meal prepping, house cleaning, and constant worry about his wife and law practice. He spent many late nights trying to stay on top of motions, documentation, laundry, and the budget.

After the hearing was complete, a parole board member asked Jim, “How are you holding up?” Having worked together for nearly two decades, Jim could feel her sympathetic eyes resting on him as she waited for a reply. It had been months since someone asked how he was doing without asking about his wife in the same breath. It took him a minute to think about how he was doing after operating on autopilot and focusing outward for so long.

Jim’s experience is common among family caregivers, who often find themselves overwhelmed by to-do lists and personal sacrifice. But thankfully there is help and information available for both caregivers and those who wish to support them. Whether you’ve been a caregiver, are a caregiver now, know a caregiver, or might become one in the future, this article is for you.

The Unsung Work of a Family Caregiver

In 2017, approximately 34 billion hours of care were provided by unpaid family caregivers, a value of over \$470 billion dollars² provided by over 40 million individuals caring for someone 18 years old or older who is ill or disabled in the United States.³ Family caregivers are called upon to provide various forms of care depending on the needs of the individual they are caring for and their own level of training and experience, all while navigating the hard realities of the healthcare system. If you are a caregiver, chances are you’re also working part or full time, since research shows that more than half of all caregivers are juggling both their caregiving role and their professional work.⁴

The role of caregiver can be all-encompassing and overwhelming. There is no official start date or end date, no means to resign, and no easy way to take a vacation or significant leave of absence. Juggling multiple needs, caregivers often provide emotional support and create a supportive place for the ill or disabled loved one (and often the individual's friends and family members) to ask questions and express fears. They're often called upon to empathize and remain present to the emotional needs of others while tending to the ever-mounting needs of the person they're caring for.



Family caregivers might assume any number of tasks related to the medical, practical, and social needs of their loved one. Common medical-related tasks include managing medical schedules, filling out medical forms, coordinating doctors' appointments, asking questions and taking notes during appointments, providing transportation to and from appointments, ensuring prescribed treatments are followed, and helping the individual navigate the healthcare system and access available resources. Practical tasks include helping the individual with bathing, dressing, grooming, feeding, mobility, housekeeping, laundry, meal preparation, shopping, yardwork, and other daily activities. Social responsibilities might include encouraging the individual to socialize, planning social outings, and arranging transportation to and from social events.

Whatever the tasks, caregivers must balance the needs of the care recipient with their own life and work schedules. They are an essential part of our healthcare system, yet stress associated with caregiving can negatively affect a caregiver's physical, emotional, social, and financial health.⁵ Thus, when called to caregiving, it's important to consider strategies for maintaining balance between your personal and professional life.

Caregiving Strategies for Legal Practitioners

When caregiving impacts your law practice, you may wonder what, if any, options you have to make adjustments. For individuals who are caring for both aging parents and their own children, the impact of caregiving can be particularly stressful. Below are some strategies for supporting yourself and your practice as you help a loved one through a chronic illness or disability.

Stay Organized

Staying organized is fundamental, as it significantly enhances your ability to provide effective care and support. Caregivers often have daily, weekly, and monthly tasks associated with their loved one's care. An organized approach can streamline tasks, saving you both time and energy. By maintaining clear records and schedules, caregivers can ensure consistency in care, avoid medication errors, and stay on top of their loved one's changing needs. Keeping your work and home spaces clutter-free reduces the risk of accidents and allows an individual to locate essential items quickly.

It also promotes a sense of calm and order, contributing to a more relaxed and peaceful environment. Staying organized can also support better communication with healthcare providers and support networks, fostering a collaborative and informed caregiving approach. Set yourself up for success by communicating with your boss, coworkers, staff, and clients about your boundaries and expectations. Create an emergency plan for both your home and office to help you stay prepared and organized.

Here are some quick tips for getting organized:

- Use a calendar to keep track of your caregiving responsibilities. This can be a master calendar that combines all your obligations (work, family, personal, etc.), or a separate calendar that only focuses on the caregiving recipient's needs (medication instructions, physical therapy dates, etc.).
- Set alarms for important times throughout the day (medication deliveries, reminders to leave on time for appointments, etc.).
- Take notes during medical appointments or ask the doctor if you can record appointments for future reference. Request after-visit summaries and store them in a dedicated folder.
- Consider creating an emergency plan using a template easily found online. Emergencies can vary in severity from minor accidents to major medical problems or natural disasters. Responding to an emergency can demand swift and appropriate responses to ensure safety and minimize harm. Include important information such as your name and phone number; other emergency contacts (family members, friends, neighbors, etc.); the care recipient's birth date, blood type, medical conditions, medications (with dosages), allergies, insurance information, and medical/assistive devices; and the names and contact information of the care recipient's healthcare providers.

Take Breaks

Providing care without respite can lead to physical, mental, and emotional exhaustion, which can negatively impact both the care that you provide⁶ and your legal practice. Simple observations of behavior show us that people tend to be more patient, attentive, and effective when they take breaks and exercise self-care. Often, when you accept that breaks are a fundamental part of the caregiving process, you become more mindful of when you need a break, enabling you to return more fully engaged and energized to complete necessary tasks. Keep in mind that taking a break to answer work emails and texts, or addressing other things on your to-do list, is not considered a break in this context.

Here are some quick tips for taking breaks:

- Schedule your breaks in your care calendar, arranging for care coverage accordingly. Incorporate both short daily breaks and longer weekend breaks into the schedule so you can get the rest you need to recharge.
- Consider what types of activities rejuvenate you, keep you motivated, and help you relax. It might be taking a walk, lying down, meditating, listening to your favorite music (or music that reflects your mood), spending some time with your pets, taking a quick nap, journaling, sketching, or watching or listening to an uplifting or funny show or podcast. Have a list of these activities and choose one when you need a break.
- Coordinate with your support network to get the breaks you need.



Accept Help

Accepting help from family, friends, support services, coworkers, and organizations can help lighten your load as caregiver and allow you to take time off to focus on self-care. Accepting or asking for help is not a sign of weakness but rather a recognition of the value of collaboration and community. Embracing help creates a network of support for the caregiver and recipient, ultimately leading to a more sustainable and fulfilling caregiving experience. It can also be empowering. By effectively communicating your needs, you are ensuring that your needs get met and your community better understands what you require.

Here are some quick tips for accepting help:

- Before saying yes or no when someone offers to help, take a few deep breaths. Notice whether you're experiencing a knee-jerk reaction to say, "no thanks, I've got it" and consider how a break may be helpful for you before responding.
- Provide a detailed list of the care recipient's needs to whoever is supporting you so you can fully disengage for the time, even if that's only for a couple of hours.
- Actively seek help and coverage from other trusted and capable family members, friends, or professionals. Maintain a list of individuals who can relieve you in case of emergencies and for planned breaks or time off.
- If possible, hire others or retain an agency/company for tasks such as housework, yardwork, laundry, food preparation, or shopping that can lighten your load and help you focus on juggling caregiving, work, and other family obligations.
- If you also have children, communicate with teachers, administrators, and other parents when appropriate. Don't hesitate to ask for support from your social networks.

Make Adjustments

Adjusting your own work schedule or workload might seem daunting, but those of us who are not professional caregivers might need to shift our priorities to focus on the needs of a loved one during a challenging time. Research shows that 83% of caregivers viewed their caregiving experience as positive, noting the satisfaction of knowing their loved one was receiving excellent care, a sense of giving back to an individual who had cared for them, personal growth, and an increase in meaning and purpose in one's life.⁷ Types of adjustments might include shifting how, when, and where your work occurs to create a routine that supports competing priorities. Examples include working off-hours or working remotely. Shifting priorities can have lasting effects of a better work-life balance, leading to reduced stress and better overall health.

Here are some quick tips for making adjustments:

- Consider speaking to a financial advisor about work adjustments that impact your income. There may be creative solutions or adjustments you can make to help ease any transitions during this time.
- Reflect on how accurate your timelines are and whether you tend to overestimate or underestimate how much time a task will take you. Include both your caregiving tasks and your work tasks. Consider asking a trusted colleague if your adjusted timelines seem realistic given the new context of your responsibilities so you can plan accordingly.
- Determine what work you can delegate to staff or ask for coverage from colleagues. If possible, consider hiring more staff or contacting a legal staffing agency for temporary assistance.

- Say no to additional work and actively set limits on the scope of your work during this time. If possible, limit the number of new cases you take on.
- Connect with colleagues, opposing counsel, and court systems to communicate effectively about realistic shifts in timelines when possible.

Conclusion

Let's return to Jim's experience at the parole hearing. After Jim had several moments to reflect on how he was doing, he shook his head, keeping his gaze fixated at the floor, and said, "not that well." With kindness and empathy, his friend and colleague of nearly two decades recognized the caregiver burnout that she too had experienced as her partner went through cancer treatments. They spent the next hour carefully considering how his law practice could shift, how a meal train would work, and who might be able to take a few caregiving shifts to allow Jim the time and space he needed to regroup and reconnect with himself. Empathy, understanding, and collaborative solutions helped Jim get through one of the toughest periods of his life. As his wife continued to decline, he reconnected with family and friends, accepting the help they offered and reaching out for support when he needed it.

As Rosalynn Carter's quote so eloquently states, caregiving impacts everyone. Check in on those you know are caregiving and consider that it's never too early to think about how you might engage in caregiving tasks while supporting your own practice and well-being, if or when the need arises.

Kerry McCarthy is a Clinical Coordinator for the Colorado Lawyer Assistance Program (COLAP). COLAP is the free, confidential, and independent well-being program for the legal community of Colorado. For more information, go to www.coloradolap.org. For a confidential consultation, discussion about your stressors, or to obtain helpful resources, contact COLAP at 303-986-3345 or info@coloradolap.org.

Notes:

1. Carter founded the Rosalynn Carter Institute for Caregivers and dedicated much of her life to mental health advocacy. See <https://rosalynncarter.org>.
2. "Caregivers in America: Helping People Live Safely at Home," America Health Insurance Plans (Nov. 2020), www.ahip.org/resources/caregivers-in-america.
3. "The Future Supply of Long-Term Care Workers in Relation to the Aging Baby Boom Generation," HHS.gov (May 13, 2003), aspe.hhs.gov/reports/future-supply-long-term-care-workers-relation-aging-baby-boom-generation.
4. "Caregivers in America," *supra* note 2.
5. Schulz et al., "Psychiatric and Physical Morbidity Effects of Dementia Caregiving: Prevalence, Correlates, and Causes," *Gerontologist* (Dec. 1995).
6. Choi et al., "Fatigue in Family Caregivers of Adult Intensive Care Unit Survivors," 48(3) *J. of Pain and Symptom Mgmt.* 353 (Sept. 2014), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpainsymman.2013.09.018>.
7. Positive Aspects of Caregiving, Am. Psych. Ass'n (2011), www.apa.org/pi/about/publications/caregivers/faq/positive-aspects.

