



## **At your Wits' End: Regaining Equilibrium as a Parent and Family Caregiver**

Being a caregiver is a rewarding and demanding responsibility. However, having the responsibility of caring for your loved one while managing the added needs of your child can be overwhelming. This can be like balancing two full time jobs without any time off and especially challenging to those who are also employed. There has been evidence that those who provide a high level of caregiving activities also had an increased likelihood of not getting rest, not having time to exercise, and not recuperating from illness. Ultimately, being a caregiver poses a threat to your well-being and if you are going to continue to provide care, you need relief from the stress that comes with it.

Today, we will discuss some common challenges you may face in your role as a caregiver to multiple people. The challenges that we will talk about are not having enough time, feelings of impatience, feeling emotionally flooded, and distracted thinking. As we talk about each of these challenges, we will also discuss a variety of strategies and solutions to help you manage your well-being while caring for your loved ones.

The first challenge we will discuss is not having enough time. Having enough time in a day is a commonly shared problem among those caring for multiple people. For many of you, you wake up at the crack of dawn preparing for another day of meeting the many needs of your loved ones. This could look like preparing breakfast, laying out medications, changing diapers and bedding, scheduling transportation or getting ready to transport your child to daycare or school, reviewing medical appointments that are on the calendar for that day, confirming medication refills, the list goes on. Simply being aware of all that is on your schedule in a single day can be very anxiety provoking. There are only so many hours in each day, and you want to make sure everyone's needs get met, including your own.

So how do you make the time for everyone and everything? You know creating more time in a day is not realistic so let's talk about some ways in which you can use the time that you do have more efficiently. The goal here is to truly make more time by making good use of the time you have. We will explore how to make more opportunities to regularly focus on your own needs and well-being.

Let's begin to talk about strategies to use the time you do have each day more efficiently. One way you can make more time is by using the maximum number of hours your child's daycare provider offers. For instance, the daycare provider may offer 10 hours of supervision per day. Rather than dropping your child off right before you begin your day or picking them up right after and using less than those 10 hours offered,



bring them to daycare a bit earlier or pick them up later and take advantage of the full time allotted. Then, use that time for you! Even if it is 30 minutes. In a half hour, you could enjoy a cup of coffee, practice meditation, take a walk, check in with a friend, read the news, and so much more. When your day is non-stop from the very beginning, 30 minutes to yourself can provide an incredible opportunity to shift your mindset to a calmer one and allow you some time to focus on yourself. Also, keep in mind, this can also be extended to the person you are caring for such as when they are napping or at a doctor's appointment.

Another specific strategy to make more time is to create and rely on a routine when possible. Having a routine allows you and others to know that there is a predictable timeline of events to prepare for. For example, your routine might look like wake up, TV time, breakfast, play time or create a craft, lunch, nap, go outside, read, or quiet time, dinner, bath, and bed. Understandably, there is variation in your days and unexpected challenges that come up but establishing as much of a set routine will take the guesswork and eliminate the added time of planning your daily tasks every day. Then, be sure to write out your routine on paper. This is an important step because not only will you be able to reference it as needed but others in your home can as well to get a general sense of what will be happening and when.

Additionally, create a routine for your own self-care. As much effort and time in thoughtful preparing and planning into the routine for your loved ones, you can equally put into your own. So, for example, you might have a routine of waking up an hour before the rest of the household, have a cup of hot tea or coffee, take a hot shower, and review the days plan. The purpose being to center yourself and rely on your own routine when possible, so you are not scrambling as you care for others. At the end of the day, reflect on or notice on how the routines went. Consider where you could have made your time more efficient and be sure to make those changes accordingly. This is your schedule, switch it up to make your life easier!

Also, another strategy on caring for your children is to lean on other parents for support. More specifically, using playdates as a way to make more time. You might be thinking, how can more appointments and social obligations create more time for me? Or you might be saying to yourself, this would just be another to do on my never-ending list, forget it. I want to challenge you to think about this a bit differently. Many caregivers just like you share the same burden of feeling there is not enough time in a day, this is a common problem. If you are able to connect with a fellow caregiver and establish the same shared goal of creating more time, it is likely the two of you can



come up with a schedule to watch each other's children for a specified amount of time on any given date to allow the other a window of child-free time. And the best part? You could exchange your childcare skills without having to pay additional money as finances might also be tight. This is a win-win for the two of you and is worthy of exploring and trying out.

As you lean on others to care for your children to make more time for yourself, remember that this applies to leaning on others to help care for your loved one too. For example, you may want to consider learning about and utilizing respite care. One way you can start this process is by contacting the VA Patient Aligned Care team or PACT which provides the primary medical care for the Veteran. Ask for the PACT Social Worker and identify your goal to get a break via respite care. Another way to lean on others for care for your loved one is by exploring if your loved one is eligible for in home supports such as a home health aide. Again, to learn more about these services you would want to discuss with your loved one's PACT team, usually the PACT Social Worker.

It is important to keep in mind that although everyone feels differently about sharing details on their personal lives and struggles; it can be helpful to open up to those who care for your children. For instance, let your daycare provider or babysitter know the difficulty you are having in balancing and how this is something you are working on. Teachers, babysitters, and others who have a trusting relationship with your child can be supportive for not only you but your child as well. They can provide your child with extra attention and be more aware of feelings that might be expressed through their behaviors.

The second challenge we are going to discuss is feeling impatient. While caring for multiple people, you are pulled in so many different directions trying to meet the demands of your loved ones. The challenges you face daily and the constant problem solving and time management you must handle can leave you feeling impatient. Impatience means you are not willing to wait for something or someone, or it is wanting to get something done quickly without waiting. Let's talk more about what this looks like, and how to manage your feelings of impatience when they come up.

The reality is, there are many situations that test your patience. I am certain right now if I asked you what has caused you to feel impatient this week, you could recall a situation or several. Feeling impatient is a normal human emotion and we all experience it from time to time. Even normal behavior from your child can evoke



feelings of impatience. For example, picture you are running behind in the morning and you are trying to put your child's shoes on, and they scream, "I do it!" This then delays more time in getting out the door because your child struggles to get their shoes on. An example whereby you might have your patience tested outside of your child could be when you learn the pharmacy is short staffed and your loved one is in the car waiting while you stand in line for their prescription, or you get stuck listening to hold music for what feels like an unreasonable amount of time waiting to speak with an insurance provider. These moments are just a few examples of what could cause anyone to feel impatient, let alone someone like yourself without any extra time to spare.

Think of a recent example when you felt impatient? What triggered you to feel that way?

First, it is important to identify when it is happening. How do you know when you are losing your patience and at your wits end or feeling emotionally flooded? You may feel the physical symptoms such as you begin to feel hot, have an increased heart rate, clench your teeth, raise your voice, and tense your muscles. In addition to physical symptoms, it is important to notice the emotional and mental signs too. These can be realizing that you are not going to meet a goal or that the task is going to take more time than you originally thought. Also, you might begin to consider short cuts, or think about abandoning that situation that is causing your impatience altogether. Another emotional sign might be feeling overwhelmed is that you experience feeling defeated, like you want to give up on your caregiving role. When you are overwhelmed it can also result in being emotionally reactive. It is so important to recognize these physical and emotional signs of impatience and being at your wits end because this recognition will provide the best opportunity to lessen the feelings of frustration and helplessness.

Now let's talk about how you can manage those feelings of impatience and feeling emotionally flooded when they do occur. After you have identified how you're feeling, find a moment as you are able and ground yourself. What do we mean by ground yourself? To be grounded means you are fully present with yourself, both mind and body. Think of grounding as a way to center yourself and feel calmer when you are being pushed to your limit. It's a technique to help you think more clearly and react more intentionally. One way you can do this is by placing your hand gently on the top of your head for 30 seconds to one minute and close your eyes to avoid distractions if it is safe to do so. Let's take a moment and try this out. Place your hand on the top of your head and close your eyes. Take in a deep breath and exhale. Experience the calming sensation it can provide. How do you feel? Grounding can be an effective method to



bring your focus to the present moment without judgement, to allow yourself to simply be aware of all that you are feeling and thinking.

Now let's explore how you can ground yourself in the presence of your children which as a caregiver is a more realistic situation. Before we do that though, let's acknowledge that it is not easy to focus on the present with little ones around. The environment with children can often feel chaotic and cause sensory overload from the toys, cartoons, instruments, loud voices, tantrums, requests for snacks, coupled with limited sleep, and so on. It can leave you feeling rushed, frazzled, unable to hear your own thoughts, and simply trying to get through the day. On top of that, you are busy moving from one task to another almost on autopilot to keep up with the constant demands coming at you against a clock you did not set. The good news is there are many ordinary moments with your child that you can use to help ground yourself. Take your child sitting down to eat lunch for example. Rather than skipping lunch yourself or eating something quickly while tending to the dishes or trying to get something accomplished as they eat, take this opportunity to be present in your child's company as you both enjoy the nourishment a meal brings. Kids are filled with joy, laughter and are great at being present in the moment which in turn helps us do the same if we will allow it. Children can also benefit from taking a break and grounding themselves in a moment of quiet. Practice grounding with them. Place their little hand on top of their head, close eyes and breathe.

Another important aspect of self-care requires sometime just being spontaneous. Break out of the routine. Do something silly, or fun or different to restore yourself. Caregivers often have a hard time experiencing spontaneity because your day to day schedule and demands are so great. But sometimes a change of plans or pace in the moment will provide you the pause and restoration in energy that is overdue. And this can look like dancing to music, singing a song aloud, visiting a park, or enjoying a picnic in the backyard.

Some other examples of using everyday moments to ground yourself with your child might be to engage in your child's activities with them versus simply setting it up and observing them play. So, for instance, if your child is painting, enjoy the creativity that flows with artistic expression and make a painting yourself with them. Another great opportunity to ground yourself is to go outside with your kids and rather than feeling like your purpose is to supervisor them, reframe this way of thinking and instead use this as a time to feel the sun's warmth on your face, the breeze catching your hair,



the natural sounds to be heard in nature such as the birds singing as you watch your children.

To balance your role as a caregiver to your loved one and your children, let's now talk about how you can ground yourself in the presence of the person you are caring for. There will be moments when your loved one is experiencing their own heightened emotions such as anger, fear, frustration, and defeat. This can easily be felt by you simply by being in their company and seeing their emotions, or more directly, such as experiencing them yell at you. When this happens, it is also helpful to ground yourself.

One way you can ground yourself around your loved one is by letting your loved one know you have heard their request or need and that you will get to it shortly, but to communicate that you first need a moment to gather your thoughts. Taking this time out can allow you a couple of minutes to practice deep breathing or another calming exercise such as the one we just tried out. Another example of how you can ground yourself when your loved one's distress is impacting you is through enjoying the time spent out of the house. For example, if you need to drive your loved one to a medical appointment, this might be a great opportunity to stop at the coffee shop nearby or drive through a local park, or visiting a friend while they are at their appointment.

In addition to grounding yourself, another strategy to manage feeling impatient and emotionally flooded is to work with it and use it as a reminder to consider alternatives. Impatience invites you to reflect on if there are more productive ways to manage your time, or it can help you sort out what is necessary versus what is not and prompt you to change your course. One example of this might be realizing that every time you go to the pharmacy a large chunk of time is used and spent away from home. Each time you go to pick up those medications, you grow more and more impatient while waiting. As a result, you become motivated to consider other options and ultimately decide to get the medications refilled by phone and mailed to your house. This change of course then continues to save you time and eliminates unnecessary agitation.

Another way this could be helpful is when you go to pick up your child from the daycare provider, you end up waiting 15 or 20 minutes while they get your child's belongings ready or because they want to have a conversation. Again, experiencing this impatience as you stand there for 15 minutes can encourage you to think about how to make more use of this precious time. As a result, it might be helpful to have a





discussion with the daycare provider in advance regarding your limited time when picking them up. The daycare provider may then appreciate your small window of time and be sure to get as much prepared for your child's pick up and understand that you do not have time to chat at that moment. Given this open communication and expectations, your time waiting may just be a few minutes; what a difference! So, as you can see, impatience is worth paying attention to because it reminds you to ask yourself: Do I need to change course and try something else?

As we mentioned already, there will undoubtedly be moments when you feel impatient with events and people around you. This is normal, you are human. This can serve you positively or negatively but it's important to remember there are not always concrete alternatives to switch to. For instance, sometimes you may need to speak with a medical provider and waiting on the phone for 15 minutes is simply what needs to happen to get in touch with them. You may however plan on that wait and while you're waiting accomplish another task as you wait.

So, what do you do in these situations when there is not a better alternative? Well, sometimes taking a time out and grounding yourself is what is needed to cope with the frustration in that moment. This sounds easy, but when you are experiencing an increased heart rate, tense muscles, thoughts of losing valuable time, it is extremely hard. To help strengthen your ability to ground yourself, try practicing grounding techniques often and in calm situations so you can be prepared to use them when those stressful situations come up unexpectedly and changing course is not in your control.

Finally, another strategy that can help you manage feeling impatient is allowing yourself to see the situation from the other person's point of view. Doing this can soften the feelings of impatience by bringing awareness and compassion for another person's challenges or situation. Let's use the example we mentioned earlier. Imagine you are running late one morning, and you are beginning to put your child's shoe on only to have them scream, "I do it!" Of course, you know allowing them to put their own shoes on will take more time, so you just want to put them on yourself. Instead of sitting there impatient and frustrated, try to look at the situation from their perspective. You might be reminded that the fact that you're running late is truly meaningless to your child. Your child does not have a sense of time or understand what it means to be running late. You might understandingly see that they just want to practice their independence and try to get their shoes on their own two feet themselves.



Just as in the situation just stated if you are struggling to manage your needs and negotiating the needs of another try to shift to the yes whenever possible. What does this mean? Shifting to the yes is a form of negotiation. It's understanding that you cannot give into your child or loved ones demands in that moment, but instead, you negotiate on when they can expect to get their needs met. For example, in this situation you might say to your child, "I know you want to put your own shoes on and it makes you so proud when you do it yourself, but right now I'm worried about how late we are. Do you think you can help me by pretending that I am the fastest at putting shoes on in the universe and let me do it this time?" An example for an adult you're caring for might be when they request a specific meal that you do not have time to cook. You might shift to the yes by saying, "You really love my lasagna and that makes me so happy, I'm tight on time today, can I make it for tomorrow's dinner instead?" So, you're not simply saying no and dropping their need; rather, you're acknowledging their request and finding a compromise or negotiating on how you can get their need met in a different way.

The last strategy we will talk about when you're feeling emotionally flooded and impatient is to accept what is. This sounds simple but it goes against everything you might be feeling in that moment. For instance, you want to be able to problem solve and get your tasks accomplished quicker but sometimes there are variables that are out of your control in allowing this to happen. When you can see your own limitations and the limitations around you, you can more easily allow what is happening to happen without the struggle to change it. To help you accept what is, try to practice deep breathing, or reach out for support from someone in your life with a calming and reassuring presence. As you practice releasing control in these moments, you free yourself up from the negative emotions and it will feel easier to let things be what they will be.

Now that we have talked about how to make more time in your day, and how to manage feelings of emotional flooding and impatience, let's explore a third challenge you may be experiencing: Distracted thinking. Here, we will talk about what distracted thinking is, how it affects you, and strategies to take back your control and refocus your attention. Let's dive right in.

Do you ever find yourself saying things like, "I forgot what I had to do?" Do you ever feel like you struggle with completing simple tasks because there is so much going on? Do you ever feel like you started something only to not be able to finish it until hours or days later? You are not alone. Distracted thinking or having your mind wander





is really the default mode of the human mind. So even if you were sitting with total silence, had a full night's sleep, all the time to yourself, your mind would still wander.

Now let's take an honest look at your situation. You're probably tired from lack of a good night's rest, you likely have very limited moments of silence in your day, and distractions are constantly put in front of you from others in the form of noise, phone calls, requests, and so on. It's safe to say you deal with distracted thinking. So, it's worth our time to talk about some strategies to limit distracted thinking because ultimately giving way to distraction over and over can build stress, create unhappiness, and even lead to depression.

One strategy that can help decrease distracted thinking is working with your schedule. For example, engage in tasks that require your full attention during the times of the day when you are not easily distracted. So, if you have to pay the bills and this takes a lot of careful review of receipts and other paperwork, you might consider doing this once your loved ones are settled in for the night rather than in the middle of the day when everyone is in need of your attention. This can help to lessen the natural distractions that will arise as you care for multiple people in your home.

Another strategy to help decrease distracted thinking is to schedule in quiet time or self-entertainment time for your child in their daily routine. Children are quick to adapt to routines and feel safe and more independent when they know what to expect or predict in their days. So, it might be an adjustment in the beginning to explain and implement quiet time for 30 minutes but can be a needed break for both of you. Instruct them to take this quiet time to read, play quietly, color or draw and so on. Overtime, this 30 minutes of self-entertainment or quiet time will be the norm for them and something they will do without pushback; at least most of the time. In this half hour time frame, you'll have an environment with less distraction that you can dedicate the tasks that require a closer focus to get accomplished. Or this will simply be 30 minutes whereby you are not getting the constant barrage of questions or chatting that can be naturally quite draining at times.

Another strategy for tackling distracted thinking is to get organized. Getting organized can help you to mentally ground yourself. Keep a journal or notebook to write down the list of tasks that need to get done each day. This will allow the mental to-do list that is always in your mind to be written down onto paper, in the same place, and will free up your brain waves to focus on tasks at hand without feeling like you need to



keep using your mental energy to constantly remind yourself of the things that have to get done.

So to keep your mind focused and organized, make lists of to-does, focus your mental tasks during times that are quiet or you have more ability to be fresh and clear, and provide your kids a routine quiet time where you can all get a break to clear your thoughts.

Let us recap what we discussed today. You are not alone in feeling overwhelmed as a caregiver to multiple people. You do not need to continue to struggle in the ways that you have been either. There are many strategies and solutions to many of your everyday challenges such as not having enough time, feeling emotionally flooded, feeling like you cannot focus, and overall feelings of discouragement. Most importantly, go easier on yourself and your family. Let some things go that can, such as dishes piling up or laundry getting behind, and lower what you expect of yourself every day. You are caring for multiple people, and that in and of itself is an everyday uphill climb.

Finally, every family is unique in their own strengths. Take a moment to consider yours. What strengths do you have? Are you good at asking for help? Do you keep connected to people that can support you? Have you reached out to neighbors, family, and friends to support one another? Are you creative in how you approach tasks? Do you know how to relax? Have you made time to exercise to burn off stress? Has your family learned how to rely on one another and cooperate to get a job done? Have you set up good routines to manage your household and does everyone pitch in to help?

It is important to recognize what your strengths are because they help to offset the demands that you face. Take some time to consider your strengths and supports and write them down to remind yourself when you are having a particularly difficult time. Then build upon these strengths, remember they are there, and use them to your advantage. As you do this, it might be helpful to share your findings with your loved one as well to help them see the strengths that you as a family share.

You are a vital source of support to your family. Every day you are showing up to meet their needs, ensuring they are well cared for. As you continue to learn how to manage the stress of caring for multiple people, such as lack of time, patience, attention, and distracted thinking you will not only be more capable of responding to your loved ones needs, but most importantly, you will be better equipped to manage your own health and well-being. Remember the caregiver support line is here for you to



help you cope with all that is on your plate. We are here to listen, to provide support and to help problem solve the unique demands that you face. Reach out to us and remember we are here for you.