



# WE are not MACHINES

Understanding carer burnout, what helps prevent it and ways to recover. **By Tricia Irving**

Every family, whānau, and aiga carer knows their role can be rewarding, but they also know it can be uniquely demanding. Most carers have other responsibilities too and juggling these with providing care can be hugely challenging. Caregiver stress is inevitable at times. However, when it starts to gradually build up, and up, and up, it can become harder to cope with.

## **We're quick to recharge our cell phones but much slower to recharge ourselves**

While we focus on the needs and wellbeing of others, our own needs and wellbeing are often given little thought. Carers work hard. Tiredness can become our 'normal'. In fact, we might not even realise just how weary we are. However, we are not machines. We have human limits and human reactions. We can't simply keep going and going and going without consequences - however much we wish we could.

Research is clear that living with a constantly high level of stress is likely to affect a person's physical, mental and emotional health and wellbeing. It can put carers at greater risk of having accidents. It commonly affects our mood and attitude. Too much stress can steal joy and pleasure from us. It can put extra pressure on our relationships and even affect our decision making. And how do you think a carer's high stress levels might affect the person or persons they assist?

**"LITTLE BY LITTLE,  
A LITTLE CAN BECOME A LOT."**

**Tanzanian proverb**

## What is “carer burnout”?

Burnout occurs when a carer experiences ongoing physical, mental and emotional exhaustion caused by the unrelieved high stress levels of their caregiving role.

It can become a debilitating condition. By the time a caregiver realises they are on the road to burnout, they are likely to already be experiencing a range of its symptoms.

The good news is that with proactive, daily self-care, burnout can be prevented or turned around.

### Here are burnout indicators commonly experienced by carers:

- ⚡ Exhaustion and a lack of energy, or feeling wired, agitated, restless and unable to stop
- ⚡ High levels of worry and anxiety
- ⚡ Often emotionally overwhelmed
- ⚡ Difficulty coping with even everyday matters – it’s hard getting through a day
- ⚡ Brain fog – difficulty concentrating and focusing – forgetful

- ⚡ Strong emotions, including irritation, impatience, anger, rage as well as:
  - Sadness and grief
  - Negativity, low mood – just not enjoying things as before
  - Feeling stuck and without motivation
  - Feeling things are out of control
  - Guilt
  - Resentment
  - Low self-esteem – not feeling good enough
- ⚡ More likely to overreact to arising situations
- ⚡ Social isolation – feeling left out of things, lonely and unsupported, or choosing to socially withdraw
- ⚡ Relationship tensions
- ⚡ Tearfulness, mood swings, anxiety issues, panic attacks, depression
- ⚡ Reactions to traumatic, frightening situations experienced personally or by the person cared for (e.g. replaying events, nightmares, on alert for more threats, avoidance of triggers)
- ⚡ A sense of hopelessness – in extreme cases, suicidal thinking

- ⚡ Sleep difficulties – too little or too much
- ⚡ Changes in eating habits – losing or gaining weight, or a poor diet
- ⚡ Lack of exercise
- ⚡ Increase in headaches, stomach aches, muscle aches and lowered resistance to illness, or existing conditions flaring up or worsening
- ⚡ Overuse of alcohol, drugs, prescribed medications, smoking or other risk behaviours to distract from the stress
- ⚡ Loss of compassion – in extreme cases, neglectful
- ⚡ Constant concerns about money
- ⚡ Feeling uncertain about the future

**If reactions become extreme, and if a carer continues to be in crisis without support**, the carer, those who rely on them, and others around them can potentially be at risk of serious harm. Tragedies can occur when a burned-out caregiver has become overwhelmed, violent or mentally unwell.

“WE TAKE OUR CAREGIVING RESPONSIBILITIES SERIOUSLY BUT WHEN LOTS OF STRESS GETS US OUT OF BALANCE, WE CAN START TO LOSE PERSPECTIVE. EXCEPT WE DON’T ALWAYS REALISE IT. WE’VE ALL GOT HUMAN LIMITS. OUR HEALTH AND WELLBEING DON’T MATTER LESS THAN ANYONE ELSE’S, DO THEY?”

Helen



## Self-care is how we take our power back

When we know what to look for, we can make wiser choices to help prevent burnout or recover from it. Getting your life into a good balance requires learning to take good care of yourself as a priority – not as an optional extra. Remember the airplane requirement to put on our own oxygen mask before assisting anyone else?

This increases the chance that you'll both be able to cope in a tough situation. In other words, the carer and the person they assist benefit from the carer's self-care. Carer self-care is always a positive choice. It is very practical. It's a burnout-buster!

One way to think about self-care is that it shows we have some self-respect. It builds up our resilience to cope with whatever life brings along. It helps us keep a positive attitude, a sense of humour, good relationships with others and the ability to persevere and adapt as circumstances change.

Self-care can lift our spirits and improve our mood. It certainly isn't just about having treats on bad days. And it's not just for use

**"CARING FOR MYSELF IS NOT  
SELF-INDULGENCE.  
IT IS SELF-PRESERVATION."**

**Audre Lorde**

in a crisis. Sometimes it will involve making choices to do things we might prefer to avoid such as seeing our GP, organising respite care, accepting help from others, or improving our diet.

All of us can sometimes feel stuck and locked into routines, habits and attitudes that get in our own way. It can help to look for circuit breakers and try something new to move forwards.

Try the following strategies!



## 10 self-care strategies to use for burnout prevention and recovery

**1 Check in with yourself regularly.** Ask yourself some honest questions, such as... How am I doing right now? How's my health? My mental health? What do I have some control over? What can I change? What are my limits? What are my early warning signs? What things stop me from prioritising self-care and why? This keeps you aware of what you're needing to be sustainable.

(You might like to see Carers NZ's article *Wellbeing WOF: Check yourself out* - search for it at [carers.net.nz](https://carers.net.nz))

**2 Focus on getting the basics right each day.** Eat a healthy diet. Drink enough water. Exercise. Get enough sleep and rest. See a doctor if you're unwell or struggling – don't miss those appointments for yourself. Do something every day that lifts your spirit.

**3 Ask for help and share the load.** We all have limits.

- ⚡ Talk with family, whānau, aiga, close friends and support professionals (GP, social workers, community workers etc) honestly about what care is needed and what support options they can offer. Say yes if someone offers assistance, even if it's not always done how you'd prefer it to be done.
- ⚡ Carers NZ can help you to know your rights and entitlements and also offer support. See [carers.net.nz](https://carers.net.nz), phone 0800 777 797 or email [centre@carers.net.nz](mailto:centre@carers.net.nz) for advice.
- ⚡ Make an appointment with a counsellor. Talking things through can help.
- ⚡ In times of acute stress or crisis, call or text 1737, available 24/7, to speak to a counsellor for some immediate support.

**4 Take short breaks through your day.** Think of them as mini vacations! Maybe sit outside. Phone someone. Get out of the house for a while. Visit family or friends. Have a long shower. Spend time with a pet. Read a book. Listen to music. Walk round the block. Use a progressive relaxation technique. Do some slow, deep breathing. See our *Weekly Time Out Planner* at the end of this story.

**5 And use longer time out / respite care.** From a regular few hours to a few weeks, respite breaks can make a big difference for carers. If you are experiencing burnout, it is absolutely essential. Studies show that using longer respite care at least once or twice a year improves a carer's wellbeing and resiliency. Put the dates in your diary. Stick to your plan. See Carers NZ's *Time Out Guide* at its website, and be sure to ask your doctor or NASC about your respite funding and planning options.

**6 Get out your strong thoughts and feelings.** It helps. You could talk to someone you trust about what you're going through. Write it down in a journal. Cry if you need to. Shout into a pillow. Walk, run, dance or exercise it out. Use art. Use music. Make something. Get away into nature. See what works for you.

**7 Talk to other carers.** You can share your frustrations, encourage each other, laugh about the realities others don't understand, swap useful information, short cuts and tips, and celebrate the good times. Phone 0800 777 797 to find out what's in your area. Why not also join Carers NZ's large Facebook's community to stay informed and connect with other carers – [facebook.com/carersnz](https://facebook.com/carersnz)

**8 Don't let caregiving take over your life completely.** Give regular time and attention to other things you find meaningful, interesting and enjoyable. Keep up with friends. Treat yourself to something. Enjoy a hobby. Join a team or a group. Try to talk to someone outside of your carer world every day. This kind of approach helps your life to keep in balance.

**9 Keep a positive outlook.** Celebrate even small victories. Look out for silver linings in situations. Notice things to be grateful for. Keep hopeful. Look for things that inspire and encourage you.

**10 Make room for laughter and fun.** Use your sense of humour. Laughter lowers stress! Share a joke. Call or visit people who make you laugh. Watch a comedy. Read something funny. Try to find the humour in even everyday situations.



WAIHO I TE TOIPOTO, KAUA I TE TOIROA.  
LET US KEEP CLOSE TOGETHER  
NOT FAR APART.

“TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF. IT’S SO  
EASY TO SURRENDER TO YOUR ROLE  
MORE OF YOUR LIFE THAN YOU  
SHOULD. YOUR LIFE STILL NEEDS TO  
ALSO BE ABOUT YOU.”

John Shore

### It could be time for a tough question.

If you think you are burned out and regularly overwhelmed by your situation and role, consider if now is the time to think about the future of your carer situation, cutting back significantly, or immediately finding more help. You don’t want to put yourself or your family member at an increasing risk of harm. **We all have limits, even when we’re giving our best to caring. We carers can find ourselves in situations that are just too demanding to manage.**

Find some people you trust to talk this through with, including of course your family member if possible. Decide on the steps that need to be taken and take them. You can still be caring, but possibly in a new way. Maybe you and your family member can now focus more on the quality of your relationship while you rebalance and become healthy and well yourself.

### Next steps?

Self-care is far from being selfish. Carers are not machines. We are humans. So, self-care is wise and healthy. What will your next self-care steps be?

*Tricia Irving has authored many books, toolkits, and grief and loss resources. She has written many of Carers NZ's resources including our upcoming updated booklet, When Caring Is Changing or Ending. Request your free copy by phoning 0800 777 77 or email [centre@carers.net.nz](mailto:centre@carers.net.nz)*



# Weekly Planner

Get in the habit of asking yourself 2 questions each day

**When you get up:**  
What am I going to do today for me?

**Before you go to bed:**  
What did I do today for me?

WHEN CAN  
YOU MAKE TIME  
FOR YOURSELF  
THIS WEEK?

**exercise**  
**physical activity**

Aim for 30 minutes of physical activity each day. Look at your typical daily routines; you may already be getting more exercise than you think (vacuuming counts!)

**other**  
**time out**

What other 'me time' can you fit in? A break can be anything that keeps you strong and well – anything that makes you feel good!

	REGULAR ACTIVITIES	SOMETHING DIFFERENT	REGULAR ACTIVITIES	SOMETHING DIFFERENT	TOTAL MINUTES
<b>M</b>					
<b>T</b>					
<b>W</b>					
<b>Th</b>					
<b>F</b>					
<b>Sa</b>					
<b>Su</b>					
<b>TOTAL ME TIME</b>					