

Care for the Caregiver

A guide for caregivers of pregnant and postpartum patients with opioid, stimulant, and other substance use disorders

Module 1: Caregiver Self-Care

Caring for yourself is one of the most important – and one of the most forgotten – things you can do as a caregiver. Whether you feel guilty for taking time out for yourself, or if you just feel like you don't have the time to take, consider this perspective: **If you don't take care of yourself, you won't have anything left to give.**¹²

Focus on the following self-care practices:¹

- Learn and use stress-reduction techniques (e.g., meditation, yoga, prayer)
- Attend to your own healthcare needs
- Get proper rest and nutrition
- Exercise regularly, even if only for 10 minutes at a time
- Take time off without feeling guilty
- Look for and accept the support of others
- Seek supportive counseling when you need it, or talk to a trusted counselor, friend, or religious leader (e.g., pastor). Identify and acknowledge your feelings. You have the right to ALL of them
- Change the ways you view situations
- Set goals

This information is from the Family Caregiver Alliance. For the full article with more details about each practice, visit this link: <https://www.caregiver.org/resource/taking-care-you-self-care-family-caregivers/>

The main idea here is to take good care of yourself – physically, mentally, and emotionally – so that you can handle the challenges of caregiving and continue caring for others.

Self-care encompasses many ideas, including getting enough sleep, eating a healthy diet, and other strategies to keep yourself feeling well. Also, if you experience persistent feelings of fatigue, resentment, or burnout, don't be afraid to talk to a professional and get some extra support.²



Module 2: Caregiver Stress

Stress, or feelings of emotional or physical tension, is a normal response for individuals caring for a pregnant or postpartum patient with opioid or other substance use disorder. Throughout your time as a caregiver, you may feel frustrated, angry, or nervous. In short bursts, stress can be positive, like helping you avoid danger or meet a deadline. But prolonged stress can be physically and emotionally harmful.

The stress continuum model below can help you better understand your level of stress throughout your time as a caregiver.³

“ It was really traumatizing for me at one point...I had moments where I sat alone and was so deep in thought because I felt like everything was my fault.”

– Narrative from caregiver from DC about their experience caring for pregnant/postpartum woman with substance use disorder

READY	REACTING	INJURED	ILL
<p>FEATURES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effective communication • Socially, spiritually active • Calm and confident • Strong, cohesive units and families • Emotionally and physically healthy 	<p>FEATURES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changes from normal behaviors • Poor focus, loss of interest • Irritable and pessimistic • Temporary and mild distress 	<p>FEATURES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unresolved loss, trauma, wear and tear, inner conflict • Social isolation • Sleeplessness and self medicating • More severe and lasting effects 	<p>FEATURES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consistent and disabling distress • Depression, severe anxiety • Symptoms get worse or get better then worse again • Relationships and work suffer
TO STAY MISSION READY	TO RECOVER AND BUILD DURABILITY AND RESILIENCE	TO BEGIN HEALING	TO GET HELP
Keep fit, eat right, relax	Get enough sleep, talk to someone you trust	Talk to a chaplain, counselor, or medical provider	Seek medical treatment

Module 3: Stress Reduction Techniques

Consider familiarizing yourself with free stress reduction techniques that can be done anywhere at any time and are proven to reduce stress. Using a variety of techniques (physical and mental) is encouraged, especially a combination of both individual and social strategies so you feel equipped at all times. The following techniques and strategies can help you feel less overwhelmed by the caregiver role.^{2,4}

Strategies you can do by Yourself for Stress

<h3>Meditate</h3>	<p>Caregivers are under constant stress. Meditation is perfect for caregivers because it's free, can be done anywhere at any time, and is a proven way to reduce stress.</p> <p>Studies have shown that meditation lowers blood pressure, boosts the immune system, and improves the ability to concentrate. The best part is that you don't have to dedicate a lot of time to meditation – you can get the benefits in just a few minutes a day.</p> <p>Here's a useful (and free!) mobile app that helps you get the benefits of meditation in 2 minutes.</p>
<h3>Breathe deeply</h3>	<p>As a caregiver, there are moments when your frustration, anger, or anxiety will spike to overwhelming levels. When that happens, breathing deeply is your best friend. It forces you to pause and calm down to better deal with whatever is happening.</p> <p>Navy SEALs use deep breathing techniques to calm themselves during life-threatening situations like searching for hidden bombs. Hey, if it works for something like that, it won't hurt to give it a try.</p>
<h3>Exercise</h3>	<p>Getting up and moving is a great way to burn off stress and improve overall health. Regular exercise helps ward off conditions commonly plaguing caregivers, like depression and heart disease.</p> <p>If you're unsure where to start, there are many YouTube videos with short, simple at-home workouts you can quickly search for and reference.</p>
<h3>Laugh</h3>	<p>As the saying goes, "it's better to laugh than cry". Noticing funny moments in caregiving situations helps lighten the mood and reduce stress for both you and the person for which you are providing care.</p>
<h3>Listen to music</h3>	<p>Music has an amazing effect on the human body, so it's no surprise that music boosts mood, lowers blood pressure, reduces anxiety, and more.</p> <p>Next time you're feeling stressed, play your favorite tunes. You can also use these top 10 songs that relieve stress.</p>
<h3>Be grateful</h3>	<p>This may sound trivial, but being grateful for things that are going well in your life does reduce stress. Studies show that practicing gratitude can make you happier, lower stress, protect you from depression, improve sleep, and boost your immune system.</p> <p>It's also quick, easy, and free – try these tips to get started being grateful.</p>

Find time alone	<p>As a caregiver, especially if you're the sole provider of care, it may be difficult for you to find time alone. However, you need to give to yourself in order to have the ability to give to others. Taking some time to write down your thoughts, watch a movie, get exercise by taking a walk, or going to a nearby park and immersing yourself in a good book (take advantage of the DC Public Library) are all excellent restorative options that can help you reduce stress.</p>
Stay informed	<p>While researching conditions on the Internet sometimes results in questionable or even unsettling results, it's often a good idea to research as much as you can about your loved one's condition so that you'll know what to expect. To ensure you're getting the correct information, talk to your doctor about good resources for information and support.</p>
Reach out and stay connected	<p>It's important to keep relationships with other people, not just the person you're caring for or your immediate family.</p> <p>Leaning on people in your support system is an effective way to reduce stress. Others, especially those in a similar position, can provide support and information and valuable opportunities to step out of the caregiver role for a while.</p> <p>Aim to find a mix of social support from online support groups, friends with whom you may have lost touch as you've gotten busier, and new friends you may meet in the community. Even walking a dog around your neighborhood can help you stay more connected to your neighbors and community.</p> <p>See the <i>Support Groups and Therapy</i> section for more ways to connect with others.</p>
Group exercise	<p>While exercising on your own may be the most convenient and preferred option for some, there are also many benefits to exercising in a group setting. Joining a group fitness class or simply exercising with friends in the same space is a great way to get you out of the house, boost motivation, and keep you accountable on meeting your exercising goals. You could also exercise with others virtually by following the same exercise video!</p> <p>As previously mentioned, there are many YouTube videos with short in-home workouts you can quickly search for and reference.</p>



Module 4: Support Groups and Therapy

One of the most important factors in drug or alcohol treatment is the strength of the support system around the person needing help. As a friend or family member of a pregnant woman who is being treated for opioid or other substance use disorder, you can have a massive impact on their recovery by showing them that you are available and supportive.

However, because a loved one's struggle with substance use disorder can be emotionally draining, friends and family members don't always have the resources or energy to provide this important support. In these cases, several organizations can help friends and families in need, including:

- **Al-Anon**
- **Alteen**
- **Nar-Anon**
- **Parents of Addicted Loved Ones,**
- **Families Anonymous**
- **SMART Recovery Family & Friends**
- **NAMI Family Support Groups.**



You can also contact the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) National Helpline, a free, confidential 24/7, 365-day-a-year treatment referral and information service for individuals and families facing mental and/or substance use disorders: **1-800-662-HELP (4357)**. This service provides referrals to local treatment facilities, support groups, and community-based organizations. Consultation is available in English and Spanish. See [samhsa.gov/fine-treatment](https://www.samhsa.gov/fine-treatment) for more information.

[TheRecoveryVillage.com](https://www.therecoveryvillage.com) provides information on these support groups.

[Zencare.co](https://www.zencare.co) to search for caregiver stress and support therapists.

[FindHelp.org](https://www.findhelp.org) provides a searchable database of community resources, including food, housing, goods, transit, education, and legal services.

“ I would've participated in something with long-term support if it was offered – to have a community of learning and support rather than just the internet.”

– Narrative from caregivers from DC about their experience caring for pregnant/postpartum woman with substance use disorder

Module 5: Relapse Information

What is relapse? ⁶

Recovering from substance and/or opioid use disorder is a process that can take time. A relapse (or multiple relapses) is one part of recovering from alcohol and other drug dependence. It can often be a feature of recovery. A relapse happens when a person stops maintaining their goal of reducing or avoiding use of opioids, stimulants, alcohol or other drugs and returns to their previous levels of use.

A lapse is a temporary separation from a person's goals to reduce taking opioids, stimulants, alcohol and other drugs. A lapse is different from a relapse because it's a brief period of substance use followed by a clear return to the person's recovery goals. For example, a person who has set a goal of not drinking alcohol may end up having a glass of wine at a party, only to return to their goal of abstaining from alcohol the following day.

Why does relapse happen? ⁶

Many things can lead a person to relapse, such as problems at work, ongoing emotional and psychological issues, and social or economic problems such as financial hardship, rejection by social support networks, and challenges in personal relationships. There is a strong connection between dependency on opioids, stimulants, alcohol or other drugs and personal challenges.

Much like dependent drug behaviors themselves, the process of recovery – and the reasons for relapse – can be very personal. **A relapse isn't a sign that the person is 'weak' or a 'failure' – it's just an old coping pattern that needs to be replaced with new ones.**



Causes of relapse: ⁶

There are a range of circumstances that may lead to relapse.

1

Situations that tempt the person to return to drug use

– for example, circumstances or places where the person would previously have used alcohol or another drug. circumstances that may lead to relapse.

2

Circumstances that act as a trigger for substance use as a coping strategy

– for example, unpredictable housing, professional or personal setbacks, social pressures, or social stigma

3

Pre-existing mental health or emotional issues

4

Pre-existing physical health issues

Poor physical health can cause people to drugs, particularly when they have persistent pain.

5

Guilt caused by lapsing

A person trying to abstain from substance use can experience internal conflict or guilt if they end up lapsing. If not managed properly, this situation can lead to self-blame and guilt that in turn mean the person is more likely to continue substance use as a coping mechanism.

It may take several attempts to get the right management strategies to maintain the long-term goal of abstaining from opioid, or other substance use disorders in the long term.



I would've liked to have more knowledge about what to look out for"

– Narrative from caregivers from DC about their experience caring for pregnant/postpartum woman with substance use disorder

[Adf.org.au](https://www.adf.org.au) provides more information on overdose risk during relapse, preventing relapses long term, and what to do when a person you know relapses.

References

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