

Finding Strength as a Caregiver

Caring for an ill or elderly loved one requires a tremendous amount of physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual energy. For many, religion and faith are an important source of strength and solace.

Sometimes, the effects of illness and the demands of caregiving can cut people off from their spiritual lives. But even if your loved one's health makes it impossible to attend religious services, you can still keep spirituality central. For instance, you can:

- Read passages from religious books.
- Arrange for a member of the clergy or a parish lay minister to visit.
- Play sacred music.
- Watch church services on television.
- Continue meaningful rituals, such as prayers before meals.
- Enjoy a sunrise or sunset together.
- Pray together.
- Sing familiar hymns.
- Use services and liturgies that the person remembers.

Your upbringing and your culture and your loved one's will shape the kind of care you provide, too. The "right" approach to caregiving varies from family to family.

Some cultures encourage an extended network of family relations extending to cousins, aunts, uncles, and even neighbors and friends that you can rely on to help you take care of your loved one. Others don't have that natural framework for support and have to find help in other ways.

Gender roles play a powerful role in caregiving. Women usually wind up doing the bulk of the caregiving for older relatives.

Ultimately, you have to find a way to balance the expectations of your loved one and your family and culture with your own needs. Honoring all of loved one's wishes and beliefs would be nice, but it's not always feasible. You have to take care of yourself to keep strong.

Remember that you can't do this alone even if your loved one might prefer you did. Get help. If you shoulder too much of the responsibility yourself, you're at serious risk of burning out. That could have terrible consequences for both of you.