

# Healthy Connections: A Caregiver's Guide to Well-Being

**KANSAS STATE**  
**UNIVERSITY**

Extension

## FACT SHEET

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A Caregiver's Guide to Well-Being is designed to support you in this journey. By offering practical tools, compassionate guidance, and evidence-based strategies, this fact sheet will help you provide high-quality care while also caring for yourself — building resilience, confidence, and connection along the way.

### Introduction

Caring for a family member or friend is an act of deep compassion — and often, quiet strength. In Kansas, nearly one in five adults is a caregiver, and unpaid caregivers provide 85% of all long-term care services for older adults, making them a backbone in a community's health care. Many people provide help without ever thinking of themselves as a "caregiver." You might offer a ride to appointments, prepare meals, organize medications, assist with finances, or support someone in personalized ways from across town — or even from across the country.

If you spend time helping a person living with health challenges or limitations, you are a vital member of their care team. Your role matters deeply.

While caregiving can be meaningful and rewarding, it can also place significant physical, emotional, and financial strain on caregivers. It's common to feel stressed, isolated, or unprepared — especially since most caregivers start with no formal training. Balancing these responsibilities alongside work, family, and personal needs can make it easy to overlook your own well-being.

### Prepare Yourself for Your Caregiving Journey

Finding yourself in a caregiver role can be overwhelming. Fear of the unknown can lead to stress and a lack of confidence. One way to reduce this stress is to take time to learn about your loved one's medical situation



and current treatments. After HIPAA approvals have been obtained, speak with healthcare professionals and disease-specific associations to learn more about how your loved one's condition may change over time. Knowing the details will help you better understand what to expect and identify any skills you may need to learn to better support your loved one.

Learn about local resources that are available in your community. Reach out to hospitals, medical clinics, assisted living and skilled nursing facilities, and home health agencies to ask about services such as respite care. Contact your Area Agency on Aging, ADRC (Aging and Disability Resource Center), local non-profits, senior centers, libraries, faith-based organizations, and community groups to learn about other programs in the area that may benefit you or your loved one.

### Build a Support Team

One in three caregivers in Kansas feel they are navigating their caregiving journey alone. Building a support team is important for both your physical and mental health and can help you with your care responsibilities. Think about who you can trust and rely

on. Possible team members may include family members, close friends, neighbors, or volunteers from a local organization, members of a faith-based community, or other community members who could help with meals or transportation. Doctors, nurses, community health workers, and home health providers can assist with training and provide guidance on managing your loved one's care. Remember that your team does not have to include those living near your loved one. Long-distance caregiving can involve various forms of support, such as managing finances, arranging in-home care, and planning for emergencies.

With knowledge of your loved one's condition and prognosis, plan and consider the help you may need, and make a list. This list may include running errands, preparing meals, helping with household tasks, sitting with your loved one while you take a break, or assisting with medical needs. This list will be valuable when both seeking assistance and responding to offers of help.

Support can also come in the form of technology. Telehealth, apps, virtual support groups, 24/7 helplines, and virtual communities create connections in new ways.

### Communicate Effectively

Communication can be challenging even on good days, and stress or misunderstanding can make it harder. For people living with physical, cognitive, or sensory limitations, changes in how they communicate can pose additional challenges for both them and their caregivers.

A helpful way to reduce this stress is to use a person-centered approach — seeing the individual beyond their limitations. Get to know their history, preferences, strengths, and communication style. When you understand what helps them feel safe and respected, you can tailor your communication to their needs. This builds trust, reduces frustration, and supports dignity.

#### Some tips for better communication:

*Show respect and be present.* Use the person's preferred name and speak to them as an adult. Offer your full attention and show you're listening with eye contact, nods, and a warm expression. Cultures and families have different traditions and communication styles. Knowing a person's history and background helps ensure your communication is respectful and appropriate.

*Include the person.* Engage them directly in conversation. Even if communication is difficult, being included helps them feel valued.



*Validate feelings.* If they become frustrated or upset, reassure them. Be patient and listen for meaning in their tone or body language.

*Communicate clearly and calmly.* Speak slowly and clearly, using a calm tone. Stay at eye level when possible and allow extra time for responses.

*Encourage meaningful conversation.* Talk about familiar or enjoyable topics — family, memories, hobbies, or current events — and keep things flexible and positive.

By using patience, understanding, and respect, caregivers can foster supportive communication that helps loved ones feel safe, connected, and valued. Adjusting to how a person is used to communicating can help them feel less anxious and frustrated.

### Importance of Self-Care

One of the most significant challenges of caregiving is taking care of yourself. Recent studies in Kansas show that 25% of caregivers reported difficulty taking care of their own health while they focus on their care recipient's needs. In addition, 3 out of 10 family caregivers in Kansas experience poor physical health for 7 or more days a month. It is important to remember that providing the best care for your loved one is only possible when you make your health and well-being a priority. Without intentional self-care, your declining physical health, emotional exhaustion, and burnout can affect the level of care you can provide.

Managing self-care means taking responsibility for your personal well-being and for meeting your needs. This includes taking time for yourself each day for personal renewal, even if it's only 15 to 30 minutes. Caregiving can stir up grief, frustration, guilt, and love all at once. Self-care creates space to process those emotions, rather than being overwhelmed by them. It enables you to

focus on habits to help your physical well-being, such as exercise, quality sleep, and regularly eating healthy meals. Self-care strengthens patience and compassion and prevents burnout. Being stubbornly strong for too long without rest can cause burnout. Taking time for self-care interrupts that cycle, leaving you refreshed when returning to your role as a caregiver. Finally, self-care helps you set boundaries. Too often, caregivers feel guilty when taking time out for themselves. By taking time for breaks, for joy-filled activities, and being away, you are showing others that your well-being matters too.

Planning for your self-care is important. Creating a plan and setting aside time each day on your calendar will make caring for yourself a long-term healthy habit. If self-care is not part of your daily routine, start small and work toward your ideal schedule. Starting small will give you a sense of accomplishment and encourage you to continue making your well-being a priority.

### **Create Your Weekly Self-Care Plan:**

*Start by listing things that bring you joy.* These might include hobbies you enjoy, staying connected with friends, or activities that help you relax or feel accomplished.

*Pick the day of the week.* Decide when you will do that activity and how long you will spend each time. For example: What I will do: Read my book. How long will I do it for? 30 minutes. You can be more specific in your planning by stating the time of day you will do this activity.

*Complete a written plan.* This is important as it will increase your chance of establishing self-care habits. Writing shifts your goals from a wish to a plan. Putting ideas on paper and then into action makes steps feel more manageable, reduces stress, and helps create a sense of accomplishment. Research shows that people who write their goals down are 42% more likely to achieve them compared to those who don't <sup>7</sup>.

*Share your plan.* Once you have a clear written plan, reach out to others on your support team and have them fill any caregiving gaps. A well-written plan provides others on your support team with clear expectations.

*Celebrate your success.* Remember, your role as a caregiver can change at any time when unexpected things arise. If you are unable to follow your plan for one day, do not get discouraged. Continue your plan and celebrate your success, no matter how small!

Caregiving is a meaningful commitment that requires knowledge, support, and intentional care for your own well-being. By preparing yourself with information, building a strong support network, communicating with patience and respect, and prioritizing daily self-care, you strengthen both your resilience and your ability to provide compassionate care. Your caregiving role is vital, and taking steps to protect your health — physically, emotionally, and mentally — ensures you can continue showing up with the strength, clarity, and compassion your loved one and others depend on.

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