



“I stepped in as my father's caregiver when my mom passed away. How can I be a good caregiver without compromising my health and well being?”

A caregiver shared with us, *“Before she passed, my mom was caring for my aging dad. She said she was too busy taking care of him to go to the doctor, even though she looked pale and tired. Now he—and all of us—have lost her, in part because no one made sure she was cared for too. Now that I’ve stepped into her role, how can I make sure I take care of myself?”* Read on for our answers.



Understand the Role Before You Settle In

In the first weeks, most new caregivers do whatever needs doing to keep things afloat. That's natural, but it's worth pausing after that to write down what you're handling day to day. You'll likely identify tasks that don't fit your strengths, your schedule or your body.

If physical caregiving is part of the picture, ask your dad's doctor about an in-home visit from an occupational or physical therapist. They can show you how to handle mobility support safely, so you're not risking your own back and joints in the process.

Sort tasks into three piles: what's genuinely yours to do, what can be delegated to a willing family member or friend, and what makes sense to hire out. Full immersion in caregiving may not be sustainable and will wear you down faster than you expect. Read our guide, [*Caregiving 101: On Being a Caregiver*](#) for more about the realities of caregiving.

Prioritizing your health helps sustain you in this caregiving journey.



You Don't Have to Do It Your Mother's Way

It's easy to assume you should care for your dad the way your mom did—same meals, same routines, same everything. But you don't have to, even if your dad expects it. Evaluate his needs and preferences honestly: is this something I can do myself, hand off to someone else or pay for?

Look at each part of caregiving; meals, groceries, personal care, medications, housekeeping; and decide what makes sense for your life. If your mom cooked every meal from scratch, maybe home-delivered meals free up hours you can spend elsewhere. If she never let anyone else stay with your dad, maybe you thrive by having a friend or hired helper sit with him once a week.



Be Proactive, Not Reactive

Don't wait for exhaustion or health problems to force a change; build in relief before you need it. Set a recurring lunch with friends. Take a walk with an audiobook that has nothing to do with caregiving. Arrange regular respite care, even when nothing is "wrong," so you have time of your own. Our guide, [*Smart Caregiving: Taking a Break*](#), has tips for making time for yourself.

Practical tools like medication reminders and automatic dispensers; non-emergency medical transportation services, fall-detection devices, an emergency SOS system and grocery delivery services are a sampling of tools and services that may allow you to safely step away. See our online presentation, [*Tech Tools for Caregivers*](#) for more.



Get the Legal and Financial Picture Early

Understanding what your dad can afford for his care—and getting access to his accounts to pay for it—makes other decisions easier. This is worth sorting out early, before a crisis forces the conversation. If possible, work with him to review legal documents, updating them to reflect his current situation. Find more legal and financial tools and tips in [Where to Find Your Important Papers](#) and [What Every Caregiver Needs to Know About Money](#).



Protect Your Own Health

This one is harder to do. Put yourself on your to-do list, and not at the bottom. Keep your own doctor's appointments, protect your sleep when possible, maintain a consistent routine, eat regular, healthy meals and move your body. Find doable self-care tips in [Taking Care of YOU: Self Care for the Caregiver](#).

Give yourself room to grieve the loss of your mother and the changes you see in your father. Caregivers often put their own feelings aside. Name what you're feeling, instead of pushing through it. Read more in our guide, [Grief and Loss](#).



Notice the Guilt—and the Burnout

Guilt tends to show up uninvited; for setting a limit, for not doing it "mom's way," for taking a break at all. It's common and worth acknowledging instead of absorbing quietly. When your emotional state starts to look like ongoing anxiety or depression, you need to prioritize yourself. Watch for these signs that you're running on empty:

- Tired even after a full night's sleep
- Quick to irritation, anger or resentment toward your dad
- Pulling away from friends, family or things you used to enjoy
- Frequent headaches, stomach issues or getting sick more often
- A sense that your life is no longer your own

If you relate to any of these, it's probably time to make adjustments and take care of yourself. If it's in your reach, a therapist who works with caregivers can help. Our guide, [The Emotional Side of Caregiving](#), can help you process guilt along with other emotions.



A Closing Thought

Caregiving isn't easy. Your mother gave everything to care for your father, but there is the quiet lesson of what it cost her: to be mindful of your own health and wellbeing. You're allowed to be whole through this journey. That's not selfish. It's what will let you keep showing up for your dad, for as long as he needs you.