



No Visitors: A Guide for Care Partners During COVID-19

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Part I: Managing Emotional Distress

Older adults living with illness are at the forefront of the novel coronavirus crisis. Many care partners are living in a constant state of uncertainty and experiencing intense emotions like fear, anxiety, and guilt. This brief article is designed to help care partners of older adults recognize and manage negative emotions during the novel coronavirus outbreak.

What are some negative emotions care partners are experiencing?

- **Fear** is an emotional and physiological response to a perceived threat in our immediate environment. **Anxiety** is the emotional and physical response to thoughts that something bad is going to happen in the future and, at the same time, the belief that we will not be able to successfully manage this negative event. Fear and anxiety are like the “Goldie Locks” of emotions because if we have too little of them, we may not be aware of the threats around us, leading to negative outcomes like not physical distancing. Conversely, if we have too much of them, we are at risk for negative health consequences.
- **Caregiver guilt** is the feeling of perceived responsibility for wrongdoing or neglecting a loved one. This feeling may be associated with thoughts like, “I put my loved one in harm’s way, when I was supposed to protect them.” These thoughts are particularly distressing for care partners who often derive great meaning from their role as a helper.
- **Grief** is our response to loss. It brings up negative emotions, like sadness, and also affects our behaviors and body. Most people think grief occurs only when someone dies, but people grieve lots of different losses like no longer having in-person visits or talking to staff at a residential care community or even the ritual of visiting a loved one, like going to a favorite bakery before visiting.

Care partners are really good at changing bad situations. One of the hardest parts of being a care partner during the novel coronavirus outbreak is that negative emotions are so intense, yet there is such little an individual can do to change the cause of their distress. Here are some tips for *managing* these negative emotions when they arise.

1. Bring yourself to the present.

Bringing your awareness to the present allows you to focus on aspects of life that are in your control. To do this, take a minute to simply notice your surroundings by quickly directing your attention to:

- 5 things you can see.
- 4 things you can feel.
- 3 things you can hear.
- 2 things you can smell.
- 1 thing you can taste

2. Explore your emotions.





Take the stance of curiosity and explore how you personally experience negative emotions. To do this, spend at least 5 minutes answering the following questions:

- What does it feel like when I am experiencing the emotion?
- What thoughts run through my head?
- What does my body do?
- When does the emotion show up?
- When is the emotion most intense?
- When does the emotion go away?

3. Distance yourself from your thoughts.

Our thoughts are often random and subjective. Yet, we give them so much power. We often allow our thoughts to dictate how we respond in certain situations as well as our physiological and emotional state, even though they may not be rooted in facts. To disrupt the power that we give to our thoughts, name them for what they are. Rather than saying, “I am responsible for my loved one being at risk,” say, “I am having the thought that I am responsible for my loved one being at risk.” This is not only more accurate, but will also remind you that you are reacting to a subjective experience, not an objective reality.

4. Re-connect with what is most important to you.

Imagine you just won the Care Partner of the Year Award and that you are going to be recognized at a large celebration. Your friends and family will be preparing speeches about how great you are as a care partner. Ask yourself: “What do I want them to say about me?” Spend 5-10 minutes writing some of the key phrases that you would want to hear about yourself as a care partner. Afterwards, try to condense these phrases to 2-3 key themes. These themes are the aspects of being a care partner that are most important to you, these are your values.

5. Evaluate your actions.

Now that you’ve identified your values, ask yourself: “As a care partner, do I act in accordance with my values?” If not, try to find activities to incorporate into your schedule that reflect your values, at least once per day. To do this:

- Write at least two ways you can realistically act out each value as a care partner *today* and schedule a time in your calendar to do these actions.
- Think about what has gotten in the way of doing each of these actions in the past. Is it an emotional issue? An environmental issue? Write down these barriers. For example, the action may be calling your mom and the barrier may be feeling stressed from work.
- Evaluate the short-term and long-term impact of doing or not doing your identified actions. For example, in the short-term, not calling mom might help de-stress. In the long-term, not calling may limit intimacy in your relationship. Pay attention to the long-term pros and cons. If the long-term pros of not doing the behavior outweigh the cons, then don’t do it! If not, then try your best to problem-solve around this barrier.

6. Take care of yourself, so you can take care of others.





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Negative emotions can deplete our capacity for compassion. If your capacity for compassion is low, your effectiveness as a care partner will also be low. Whether it is meditation, exercise, reading, or calling a friend, find at least 30 minutes each day to do something pleasant with yourself.

As a human, particularly as a carer, negative emotions are unavoidable. During the novel coronavirus outbreak, people have good reason to experience negative emotions daily, yet these emotions still cause suffering. Jon Kabat-Zinn famously said, “you can't stop the waves, but you can learn to surf.” When changing your situation to alleviate suffering is not an option, try the above mentioned tips to adjust the way you interact with distress.



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