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The holidays are always a wonderful time of year for family gatherings, reflection on what we have and the spirit of giving.

The television is packed with specials showing relationships and families coming together for the holidays.

But the holidays can also be a time of stress and sadness for those who are caring for family members that are struggling with health problems, frailty, dementia and loss.

Those who care for these individuals may feel overwhelmed, frustrated, depressed or resentful as they watch "perfect" families enjoying the holidays.

There are many surveys and documents that show that caregivers are highly susceptible to these feelings. If you are a caregiver, there are measures you can take to avoid this.

First: Remember, that you are not alone.

If you are new to caregiving or have been caring for someone for a very long time, remember that the perfect family on television is not reality for many Americans.

You are not the only one with these challenges. A recent study by the National Alliance for Caregiving and AARP found that 44.4 million Americans age 18 or older are providing unpaid care to an adult.

In fact according to the survey provided by the National Family Caregivers Association:

The typical caregiver is a 46-year-old Baby Boomer woman with some college education who works and spends more than 20 hours per week caring for her mother who lives nearby.

Female caregivers provide more hours of care and provide a higher level of care than male caregivers.

Almost seven in ten (69 percent) caregivers say they help one person.

The average length of caregiving is 4.3 years.

Many caregivers fulfill multiple roles.

Most caregivers are married or living with a partner (62 percent), and most have worked and managed caregiving responsibilities at the same time (74 percent).

Second: Find help.

There are many resources available to a caregiver. Some of these include family members, friends, a local religious group, elder care agencies and homecare providers.

The internet provides many great resources and help.

The <http://www.longtermcarelink.net/> National Care Planning Council offers many articles, brochures and local referrals to help caregivers find the help that they need.

Most family members are willing to help, but just don't know what to do.

Many caregivers feel that they are the only one who can give the best care.

It is important to communicate with other family members about what kind of help you need and let them know specifically what they can do.

A number of organizations and private companies will give you advice and guidance –many for free.

If your care recipient has a very low income, you might get free help from your local “http://www.longtermcarelink.net/eldercare/ref_state_aging_services.htm” Area Agency on Aging. A lot depends on available funds.

Lastly: it is important to take care of yourself first in order to give effective and loving care.

Stephen Covey tells a story in his book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* about a man who is sawing a tree.

A woman approaches and asks the obviously exhausted man how long he has been sawing the tree. He tells her that he has been there for hours.

She says “Well, I see that your saw is dull, if you would just sharpen your saw you would be able to saw it much faster and with less effort.”

He replies, “I don’t have time to stop and sharpen my saw, I need to chop this tree down now!”

It seems pretty silly that the man just doesn’t stop for a few minutes to make the work easier.

It is common for caregivers to do the same thing. They focus on caring for their loved one and run themselves down instead of stopping to “sharpen their saw.”

Covey states that “sharpening the saw” is to take care of yourself by keeping your physical, mental, emotional and spiritual self balanced. There is joy and respite in balancing all of these areas in our life.

This is what makes us efficient and happy. Here are some ways for you as a caregiver to sharpen your own saw:

Maintain a positive attitude. Take time to be grateful for everything that is good in your life.

There is always something. Adjust your expectations for the holiday season.

If you aren’t expecting that perfect holiday family picture, then you won’t be angry and frustrated that it isn’t something you have right now.

It is always possible to change your attitude and perceptions, but it is not always possible to change your circumstances.

Eat healthy food and be sure to get some exercise. Do this in small increments if it is too overwhelming to plan menus.

Drink more water, cut down on sugary snacks, pick up some vegetables and fruit to grab.

Walk or do marching in place. Run or walk up and down stairs if that is all the time you have right now.

Forgive and let go of frustrations, anger, resentment and guilt. These are common feelings for caregivers.

The best thing a caregiver can do for their own emotional health is to clear out these negative thoughts and feelings.

Get counseling, talk to a friend or family member or simply write down the negative feelings to get them out of your system.

Never take your anger and frustrations out on those you care for.

Take time to do something you enjoy and give yourself a little bit of rejuvenation everyday.

Laughter is a great stress reliever. Find something funny to read or get on the internet and find a funny video to watch.

During the holidays, be easy on yourself. If you enjoy holiday activities, then get out there and do them.

Ask someone to help with your caregiving duties even if it is just for an hour or two to shop or to see a concert or movie.

There are day care facilities or home care services available for short term care.

Being a “perfect” caregiver during the holidays does not have to look like the perfect on-screen holiday family.

How you handle your circumstance will be the key to creating your own peace, happiness and cheer during the holiday season.

The holidays can be a time of reflection on good things. Your attitude and a little care for yourself can make a big difference in the care that you give in the coming year.