



## **You Can't Do It All: How to Be Kind to Yourself**

By Cassandra Van Dyck

*"Ring the bells that still can ring*

*Forget your perfect offering*

*There is a crack in everything*

*That's how the light gets in"*

- Leonard Cohen

When you become a caregiver, you may find that some of the things in your life that used to come easily may now be harder. You might have less time to cook the kind of meals you want to eat or to get to exercise classes as often as you used to. There's a good chance that you will struggle to make it to as many social events or spend as much time on your hobbies. You could be forgetful and miss an appointment or not notice when something is amiss with your care partner. It can be tempting to be hard on yourself for the way your lifestyle is changing or mistakes that you might make. You might feel that even though you now have the responsibility of caring for a loved one, you should also be able to do everything you used to do just as well as before.

Taking pride and care in the way you spend your time is a positive thing! It shows that you value yourself and that you care about other people enough to make an effort. The trouble occurs

when you feel pressure to be at the top of your game all the time. Perfection simply does not exist, and striving for it can cause an inordinate amount of stress.

### **Consider this your invitation to take a load off.**

Take a deep breath, shake out your hands, relax in to your seat. Try to let go of the pressure to do things to the best of your abilities all the time for just a minute, and consider this: a caregiving journey is never an easy one and it's impossible to do things perfectly. There will be days when you feel you ticked all the boxes on your to-do list and there will be days when you wonder why you even try to write one. There will be conversations where you feel you said exactly what you wanted to and appointments where you wonder if you spoke up when you should have. You are worried and feel pressured because you care.

When you feel that you are not living up to the expectations you have of yourself, it can be hard to know how to turn off the nagging voice that's telling you you're not doing all you could be as well as you want to. If you're battling this feeling, consider trying these visualizations and writing exercises to calm your mind and give yourself a much needed break.

### **Visualization**

*Settle in to a warm bath, find a quiet, cool spot under a tree on a summer's day, or get cozy in bed. Take a deep breath in and out, and thank yourself for taking the time to do this exercise.*

*Picture yourself walking home with from the grocery store while carrying heavy bags. The handles are pulling at the skin on your fingers and your shoulders are aching from the weight. It's a hot day and your shirt is clinging to your back. Now stop for a minute and put your bags down. Shake out your hands, air out your shirt and take a long sip of water from the bottle you are carrying. How do you feel? Chances are, you feel energized and ready to tackle the final stretch home. Maybe you're realizing that it would be better to call a friend for a ride or wait at a bus stop.*

*Parallel this visualization to your caregiving journey and ask yourself: what do I need most right now? A break, someone to talk to, or a helping hand? Doing a mental inventory of where you're at can help relieve pressure and take action.*

### **Writing Exercise**

*Set aside half an hour and find an inspiring place in your home, outside in a park, or in your favourite coffee shop and get out a pen and paper. Read the instructions, and then set a timer for 10 minutes and write without stopping.*

*Think of someone you love dearly and picture them in the same situation you are in. What would you say to them if they said they were struggling to do everything as well as they wanted to? Would you encourage them to work harder, or would you tell them to be easier on themselves and remind them of all the good they're doing? Write a letter to a friend who is going through exactly the same thing you are. What would you tell them?*

How did that feel? Treating ourselves with the same love and care we'd treat someone else with is a helpful way to get some perspective because our expectations of self are usually far greater than what we expect from others.

Remember that asking for help when you need it is a powerful way of taking care of yourself, and that there are many ways to do so. Asking for help could look like reaching out to people for tangible things like assistance with grocery shopping and meal cooking, or helping your loved one get to their appointments. You might want to consider looking in to short term respite options to give yourself a break or allow yourself to get some other things done. Asking for help might look like booking a session with a counselor or a massage therapist, or finally making it to one of the caregiver network groups you've heard so much about! If you're unsure of what you need to ease some of the stress, make sure you reach out to someone to work through your thoughts and alleviate the pressure.

The caregiving journey has many twists and turns, and they won't all be the right ones. Remember to give yourself the same care and understanding that you give to your loved one, and to find support when you need it by reaching out to a close friend, a professional, or a faith-based organization.