



Preserving Caregivers on the Front Lines Handout

Caring for a Veteran loved one is a big job. It takes a toll on your physical, emotional, and mental health. The role of caregiver calls you to focus on the person who needs care instead of you. Your self-care can be neglected, regardless if your loved one needs nonstop or on and off care. It is this loss of attention to yourself that places you at risk.

How can you return your attention back to you, in order to preserve your well-being?

- **Seek understanding-** It is important to be understood. This is a great need for struggling caregivers. Healing can come from simply being understood. There is relief that can come by sharing with another who simply understands.
- **Identifying what you need-** What are you looking for when you want to be understood? Do you need someone to know and acknowledge your distress? Is it comfort or support you need? Do you need the burden of your duties and emotional stress to be lifted? Do you want to let go of control or give up being in charge?
- **Barriers to self-attention-**Barriers such as: thinking you have no right to complain, that your suffering doesn't compare to others, you don't deserve to be upset when your loved one has had so much to cope with, you don't have time to pay attention to yourself, you believe no one will understand or care, or you may think "what's the point of letting myself get upset it won't change anything anyway!"
- **Remove barriers by seeking and building support-** Continue to expand your choices for support. Build a broad and flexible support network. Make a list of these supports to remind you when stress makes it harder to know you are not alone.
- **Daily check in-** Make a daily practice of checking in with yourself to attend to your feelings and needs.
- **Enjoy the pleasure of your senses-** Make time to enjoy sights, tastes, smells, and touch around you. The senses offer much comfort and pleasure. They offer a brief break from your struggles. Simply pay attention to what you enjoy. Let your attention rest there for a moment. This can feel like a soothing balm.
- **Attending to your physical health-** Go to the doctors. Shift eating habits to healthier choices. Do simple stretches or take brief walks. These things can remind you that you matter and can make a positive impact on your wellbeing.



- **The wisdom of acceptance-** Notice when you are pushing to control something. Consider if you are pushing against something you can, or can't change? Would a breath of acceptance be a wiser alternative?
- **Attention to your breath-** There is a powerful tool in your coping tool kit. This is simply to notice to breathe in, to slow down, and simply take a breath.

Mindfulness Meditation

Make sure you are seated comfortably. Make sure your body is supported and your legs are uncrossed. Place your feet on the floor and rest your hands in your laps or on your thighs. If you are able, close your eyes. This will keep you from being distracted. Keep your mouth gently closed, not clenched, and let your tongue lightly touch the roof of your mouth. Breathe through your nose, unless for some reason you aren't able. When you are settled start by taking a few deep breaths and then exhale slowly. Breathe in deeply and exhale slowly.

Now don't try to control your breath in any way. Allow it to find its natural rhythm and depth. Bring your attention to the rising and falling of your belly as you breathe. You are just featuring your breath as a focus of attention. You don't have to do anything fancy just pay attention to your breath. It knows what do all on its own. You don't have to force it or control it in any way. Just follow your breath lovingly and with attention, in and out. If it rests between breaths, relax and trust that it will resume. There are no expectations, and no worries to do it perfectly. You are just noticing and following your breath.

You may notice your mind wandering. You may find your thoughts floating through, distracting your attention to the focus on your breath. This will happen. This is what your thoughts and feelings will do. You may be thinking of what you have to do next. You might be restless. It's ok. Your thoughts are like the waves in the ocean. They will rise and pass. Just guide your attention back to your breath rising and falling.

Drop into the place of calm and quiet that is there in your breath beneath the surface of the ocean waves. There is a place of rest and calm for you. Give yourself up to the quiet awareness of this moment. This quiet is found when you focus on your breath.

You may return again, and again, if you wish, to this place of restoration. You may return again, and again, as a kind and gentle act of self-love.