

**Take Care of  
Yourself  
While Caring for  
a Loved One**

**50 Easy Ways  
to Replenish Your Spirit,  
Refresh Your Attitude and  
Recharge Your Life**

**Karen Rowinsky**

## **Dedication**

To Max Rowinsky in honor of his courage,  
and to all those who supported us as he fought the good fight.



## Introduction

Whether you are in a time of crisis or involved long term, taking care of a loved one can be one of the most exhausting, challenging, difficult, yet loving things you will ever do. If you are reading this, you are probably in the midst of your commitment as a caretaker. But, are you doing your loved one and yourself a service if you are not taking good care of yourself?

**You cannot give optimal care to your loved one unless you are giving it to yourself first.**

I learned this lesson when my husband, Max, was diagnosed with liver disease. We were both 40 at the time. In the six years before his death, Max had two liver transplants and numerous other health problems. We also moved to another city, my father died from colon cancer, my mom was diagnosed with breast cancer, we were one paycheck away from bankruptcy, our relationship was rocky, AND our two children became teenagers!

This booklet provides you with quick, easy, and inexpensive ways to replenish your spirit, refresh your attitude, and recharge your life. You owe it to your loved one to follow these suggestions. More importantly, you owe it to yourself!

The strategies are divided into three areas of our lives: **Body, Mind, and Spirit**. Depending on your lifestyle, you may need to pay attention to one or more areas.

While I have listed 50 easy ways, don't think you have to use all of these suggestions at once. Start by choosing one or two. You may be overwhelmed already; I don't want you to increase your stress by trying to do everything on the list. Be good to yourself even as you learn to take care of yourself.

*Karen Rowinsky*

## Body

Taking care of yourself means taking good care of your body. You can't help others if you are not as healthy as possible, or if you have no energy.

### 1 Be Careful

When you are stressed, you are distracted and more prone to accidents. Slowing down helps.

### 2 Get a Checkup

Stress takes a toll on your immune system. Visit your doctor, go to the dentist, and check your vision to be sure you are healthy and that everything is working optimally.

### **3 Eat Healthy**

Even if you are not hungry or don't have time, healthy food provides much-needed energy. Keep healthy snacks handy. Assign a friend to help you monitor your diet.

### **4 Drink Water**

You will feel better and your body will function better if you drink eight 8-ounce glasses of water a day.

### **5 Exercise**

Call it "recess!" Physical exercise produces endorphins and relieves muscle tension. Try for at least one 10-minute walk a day. More would be better.

### **6 Rest**

You MUST have sleep. Try 15-minute power naps during the day. Talk to your health care provider if you are having trouble sleeping at night.

### **7 Find Some Comfort**

Warm drinks such as herbal tea or warm milk are soothing. Find your "comfort" foods and have them available for a treat.

### **8 Relax**

Listen to relaxation tapes. Find someone to teach you relaxation exercises. Just a few minutes of relaxation will leave you refreshed.

### **9 Stretch**

Take a 5-minute stretch break every hour you are awake to ease tight muscles caused by anxiety and stress. Use good posture when you are sitting or standing.

### **10 Get a Massage**

Treat yourself to a full body massage by a massage therapist. If anyone asks you what you need, tell them, "A back rub!"

### **11 Give Yourself a Foot Massage**

11 Buy some peppermint foot lotion and give yourself regular foot massages.

### **12 Take a Hot Bath**

Give yourself a 15-minute soak in a hot bath. Use fragrant bath oil, light a few candles, and play some soothing music.

### **13 Try Aromatherapy**

Find fragrances that bring you comfort, and surround yourself with them.

## **14 Express Your Anger**

Acknowledge your anger at your circumstance. Find healthy ways to dissipate it, such as exercise, finding a private place to scream, or even punching a punching bag.

## **15 Have a Good Cry**

Even though it feels as though, if you started crying, you wouldn't be able to stop, let yourself cry. You deserve a "pity party." Find some privacy and let those tears flow.

## **Mind**

The way you think about your situation has an impact on the way you feel. Using your mind in a positive way is a form of taking care of yourself.

## **16 Get the Scoop**

Knowledge is one of the best cures for anxiety. Factual information is of the utmost importance. Learn as much as you can about your situation using expert sources, not "hearsay."

## **17 Find an Information "Buddy"**

Find someone who is not emotionally involved to help you think clearly. Take that person with you to the doctor, when you visit care facilities, etc. — any time you are going to have to hear and understand important information.

## **18 Rely on Your Wisdom**

Know your limits. Because of the stress and impact on your life, you may experience clinical depression and anxiety disorder. Ask your health care provider for information about these, and be sensitive to the fact that you may need some help.

## **19 Use Healthy Ways to Cope**

Examine the way you personally deal with stress. If you are like many people who turn to substances like alcohol, drugs, or even food to dull your pain, find someone who will help you find healthier stress management tools.

## **20 Make a Plan**

Make a list of things that you must get done. Decide the order in which you will tackle your list. Then make a To Do List for each day. Limit the items on the list to those that you can reasonably get done and then enjoy crossing items off.

## **21 Keep a Journal**

Have a notebook around to jot down things you want to remember, feelings that you need to express, ideas that you want to explore — just about anything your inner voice wants to say.

## **22 Have a Personal Mantra**

Choose a prayer or phrase that has meaning to you and gives you strength. Repeat that phrase over and over in your head or out loud when you feel like you are going to lose it. Concentrate on your voice or thought, and soon you will have the strength to do what you have to do.

## **23 Stay As Organized As Possible**

As you know, it's not unusual for crisis to hit at any moment. To ease your stress, keep your household business organized. Make sure you keep track of mail and bills to be paid. Enlist the help of a trusted relative or friend to help you keep on top of things.

## **Spirit**

Our spirit is the part of us that enjoys life, feels fulfilled, and experiences pleasure. Even in the hard times, we need to attend to our spirit. It's hard to imagine that you can have a joyful spirit in times of extreme stress, but by doing the following, you will be giving yourself a chance at joy.

## **24 Take Time Out**

Schedule time every day to get away from your situation. You need some "away time," even if it is just 15 minutes sitting on the front porch or lying in bed staring at the ceiling.

## **25 Don't Overcommit**

When you are taking care of a loved one, you have the right, and obligation, to limit your commitments. Unless it's your boss asking you to do something, use the words "I don't want to!" liberally. Given what you're going through, expect that the world should and will cut you some slack.

## **26 Create a Calming Environment**

Have at least one room in your home that is soothing to your senses. Beautiful music can relax you. You might even try a tabletop fountain to set a mood of serenity.

## **27 Reduce Overload at Home**

Be reasonable with your standards. If friends ask how they can help, suggest they give you a day of house cleaning service or make you a meal. Most people want to do something for you and will be thrilled when you tell them what you need.

## **28 Change “Guilt” to “Regret”**

It is easy to feel guilty about things that you aren't able to do, feelings that you have, even words that you wish you wouldn't have said. You don't have time for guilt, though. Whenever you hear your mind-talk use the word “guilt,” change it to “regret” and it will magically feel less intense.

## **29 Give Yourself a Pat on the Back**

Take pride in what you are accomplishing and applaud the courage you have exhibited in meeting the needs of your loved one. Sometimes it feels as if no one notices your sacrifices. It doesn't matter, though, as long as you feel good about doing the right thing.

## **30 Take One Day at a Time**

Keep yourself in the moment. The future can often seem scary or impossible. We don't know what the future will hold, so it is a waste of time and energy to think about the “what if's.”

## **31 Get in Touch With Your Spiritual Self**

Many people take great comfort during the hard times when they pray or meditate. Being part of a religious community can help you get through. During times of pain, it is common to question your spiritual beliefs. Try not to look for answers, but concentrate on getting some comfort.

## **32 Create Your Own Special, Safe Place**

When times get tough, imagine a place that feels safe to you. It might be the home in which you grew up, or a secret hideaway. Use your imagination to experience the place with all of your senses, and it will provide you with a few minutes' calming respite.

## **33 Think of Those Less Fortunate**

There are always people who have it harder than you. When you're feeling sorry for yourself and it's not making you feel better, open the newspaper and read a story about war, famine, or disaster in another country. Unfortunately, it will be easy to find the story on any given day. Just reading about someone else's woe can put yours into perspective.

## **34 Learn Something New**

Get a book from the library, read a magazine article, or watch a television show about a topic unfamiliar to you. Trying to learn or understand about something new can provide you with some much-needed distraction.

## **35 Have a Hobby**

Handwork such as knitting, crocheting, quilting, or counted cross-stitch can give you something to do when you don't have the energy to use your mind. Choosing and working on a project is fun, gives you a ready source of gift items, and dissipates nervous

energy. Any hobby can offer a chance to take yourself away from your current situation, if even for just a few minutes.

### **36 Indulge Yourself**

If anyone deserves indulging, it is you. Treat yourself to a little gift. It could be a beautiful rose, a small piece of gourmet chocolate, a new fragrance – anything that you would consider special and that would bring you pleasure.

### **37 Build and Maintain a Support Network**

You can't endure this ordeal alone. You can use friends, Internet newsgroups, or support groups. It's imperative that you develop a group of people that you can talk to anytime, day or night. Look for people who are low maintenance and can be there for you when you need a good laugh, a shoulder to lean on, or just a sounding board for your fears.

### **38 Do Not Limit Your Friends**

Have a variety of friends for different purposes. Some of your relationships can be superficial, others quite intimate.

### **39 Tell Someone Your Secrets**

Find someone who can listen to your deepest, darkest thoughts and ramblings. We all think horrible thoughts about our situation. Keeping those thoughts inside of us can let them fester. Just saying them out loud to someone dissipates their intensity or even makes them go away completely.

### **40 Find Enjoyment Every Day**

If you haven't had (or forced yourself to experience) a moment of pleasure during the day, then do this before you go to bed at night: Step outside, take a deep breath of night air, and gaze at the beautiful sky. Whether starry or cloudy, the night sky makes your cares seem small in the grand scheme of things.

### **41 Grow Your Sense of Humor**

Listen to comedy records, find sit-coms you like, go to a funny movie, or find humor on the Internet.

### **42 Spend Time in Nature**

At least once a week, if not every couple of days, spend some time outside. Experience the birds, squirrels, grass, and trees. No matter what the season, some time in the great out-of-doors can be calming and refreshing.

### **43 Escape With a Good Book**

Choose one that's purely for fun. Don't read anything depressing, scary, or that requires you to think too hard.



## **44 Find a Creative Outlet**

Write, paint, draw, craft, or take some photographs. Use your creativity to express what is on your mind and in your heart.

## **45 Enjoy Music**

Listen to recordings, go to concerts, or play an instrument. Different kinds of music can calm you, stimulate your energy, even bring back memories of better times. Have friends make you tapes of their favorite music, or try different radio stations to find a variety.

## **46 Dance**

Close the door, turn on a lively tune and set your feet to dancing. Even a “chair dance” can lift your spirits.

## **47 Be Silly**

Have at least one friend or group of people to be silly with. They may even want to dance with you. Assign them to plan an outing that is out of the ordinary for you. Let it be a “mystery” trip for an hour or two to give you some respite and fun.

## **48 Laugh at Yourself**

No matter how horrible a situation, there is usually something that is ridiculously funny about it. It’s called “gallows humor” and it works! You just have to be careful in choosing whom you share your funny thoughts with.

## **49 Cultivate a Positive Outlook**

Put a positive spin on events, even if you have to reach. Take the word “problem” out of your vocabulary and use “challenge.” Even at the lowest, you can always find a way that a situation could be worse.

## **50 Schedule a Meltdown**

Sometimes you just need to stay in bed to rest and renew. Your day off should not include any errands, visits, or laundry. It should include sleep, sleep, and more sleep. You may have to plan it, or you might just “call in sick” one day. Doing so will help make you well!

## Resource List

You have many resources available to help you through this time. The challenge is to identify them. If you have Internet access, or know someone who can help you, your job will be easier.

### Books

There are many books that speak to the needs of caregivers. You may want to check with your librarian or bookstore for suggestions. A good place to start is with the illness your loved one has; i.e., if he or she has Alzheimer's disease, you can start with books about that condition. The same goes for cancer, Parkinson's disease, etc. You can also search an Internet book site such as Amazon.com. Enter the word "Caregiver," or the condition your loved one has, into the search blank, and you will find many books available on the topic.

### Support Services

Support services differ from community to community. The first place to check is your local Yellow Pages under "Associations" or "Social Service Organizations." Support groups are often available through your local hospital. You can also check your newspaper to see which groups operate in your community.

### Internet

On-line resources change often. Go to [www.50EasyWays.com](http://www.50EasyWays.com) for an up-to-date list of resources. There you will not only find links to national organizations, but links to on-line communities of caregivers as well.



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