

Carol Van Ness tips on Caregiver Burnout

In order to avoid caregiver burnout, I recommend to all my caregivers to set boundaries and take care of yourself. Everyone has heard the flight attendant's direction of putting the oxygen mask on yourself before placing it on your child. That is exactly what we need to do as caregivers- knowing how to get the 'oxygen' that we need before taking care of all the 'oxygen' needs of our kids. Boundaries are essential to all healthy relationships and, really, a healthy life. Unfortunately, setting boundaries is a skill that many of us don't learn, or don't feel as though when you are caring for a child with a disability, that you can allow yourself to do. I have found a multi-step process developed by psychologist and life coach Dr. Dana Gionta that I have adapted to work with our situations.

#1 The first step in setting up boundaries is naming them. You can't set good boundaries if you're unsure of where you stand. Consider what you can tolerate and accept and what makes you feel uncomfortable or [stressed](#) out. Is it when your child has thrown 10 tantrums already and it is only 8 am, or when your children are fighting over who gets to wear the headphones in the car, screaming and not letting up? "Those feelings help us identify what our limits are."

#2 Tune into your feelings. According to Dr. Gionta- there are two key feelings that are red flags or cues that we're letting go of our boundaries: discomfort and resentment. This is burnout. It is hard for a parent or caregiver to admit, but a lot of times we can resent the situation that we are in. She suggests thinking of these feelings on a continuum from one to 10. If you're at the higher end of this continuum, during an interaction with your child or in a situation, Gionta suggested asking yourself, what is causing that? What is it about this interaction, or the child's behavior that is bothering me? Do I need to step away? Resentment usually "comes from being taken advantage of or not appreciated." It's often a sign that we're pushing ourselves beyond our own limits because we feel guilty (and want to be a good parent, for instance),

#3 Be direct. Give yourself permission to say no and ask for help. Fear, guilt and self-doubt are big potential pitfalls. We might fear our spouse's response if we set and enforce our boundaries. We might feel guilty by speaking up or saying no to a family member or an invitation to another birthday party when we know it is too overstimulating for our child. Many believe that they should be able to cope with a situation or say yes because they're a good father or mother, even though they "feel drained or taken advantage of."

We might wonder if we even deserve to have boundaries in the first place. Boundaries aren't just a sign of a healthy parent/child relationships; they're a sign of self-respect. So, give yourself the permission to set boundaries and work to preserve them.

#4- Practice self-awareness. Again, boundaries are all about honing in on your feelings and honoring them. If you notice yourself slipping and not sustaining your boundaries, Gionta suggests asking yourself: What's changed? Consider "What I am doing or [what is] the other person doing?" or "What is the situation eliciting that's making me resentful or stressed?" Then, mull over your options: "What am I going to do about the situation? What do I have control over?" Remember you cannot control the behavior of your child or anyone around you, all you can control is how you respond.

#5 Make self-care a priority. which also involves giving yourself permission to put yourself first. When we do this, "our need and motivation to set boundaries become stronger. [Self-care](#) also means recognizing the importance of your feelings and honoring them. These feelings serve as "important cues about our wellbeing and about what makes us happy and unhappy. "Putting yourself first also gives you the energy, peace of mind, and positive outlook to be more present with your child and be there for them. So go ahead and make the appointment to get a manicure and pedicure. Go ahead and hire the babysitter so you and your husband can have a date night. Remember- When we're in a better place, we can be a better parent."

#6 Seek support. If you're having a hard time with boundaries, "seek some support, whether [that's a] support group, church, counseling, coaching or good friends." With friends or family, you can even make "it a priority with each other to practice setting boundaries together [and] hold each other accountable." There are many Autism Facebook communities and support groups in Colorado Springs alone, try to find one in your community and get involved. It is also a great platform to share stories and experiences and get some great advice from other caregivers who are going through the same thing.

#7 Be assertive- Of course, we know that it's not enough to create boundaries; we actually have to follow through. Even though we know that people aren't mind readers, we still expect others to know what hurts us or stresses us out. Since they don't, it's important to assertively communicate with the other person when they've crossed a boundary. In a respectful way, let the other person know what in particular is bothersome to you and that you can work together to address it.

#8 Start small Like any new skill, assertively communicating your boundaries takes practice. "Gionta suggested starting with a small boundary that isn't threatening to you, and then incrementally increasing to more challenging boundaries". An example could be asking your spouse to take your child to therapy 2 days a week. Build upon your success, and [at first] try not to take on something that feels overwhelming. Setting boundaries takes courage, practice and support.

And remember that it's a skill you can master. Just like the social skills your child is learning, keep on practicing, and don't give up. Avoiding caregiver burnout is worth it, because your children with disabilities grow up and become adults who deserve a loving, stable, home and a Healthy, Loving, Everlasting relationship with YOU!!

Resource: PsychCentral online publication <https://psychcentral.com/lib/10-way-to-build-and-preserve-better-boundaries#1>

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