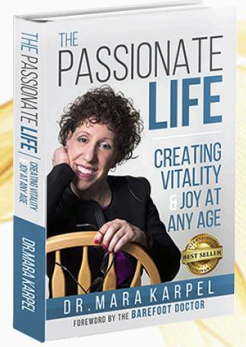


# LIVING THE PASSIONATE LIFE

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## 9 Tips to Living the Passionate Life as a Family Caregiver

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Living a passionate life, especially when caring for and/or advocating for a loved one, can be extremely challenging. It's not unusual to feel that we have given up on our life path and lost our sense of passion. However, there are small steps we can take to experience, at the very least, *moments* of passion and joy, in the midst of chaos. Enjoying these moments of passion and joy leads to increased resilience, a necessity on the caregiver's journey. These moments could even

expand to create a life of passion during our caregiving journey, perhaps even incorporating the caregiver journey. Here are 9 of those small steps.

1. **Prioritize Self-Compassion.** Being a caregiver can be extremely stressful, and, in fact, caregivers have been found to have a statistically higher rate of chronic illnesses, severe emotional issues (such as depression and anxiety), and even earlier death. Self-compassion has been proven to foster resilience in our health and emotional well-being. Having resilience is crucial for our ability to continue doing our best, both as caregivers and in our own lives. Taking care of our health through exercise, eating right, and practicing self-forgiveness, among other things, are all part of self-compassion, but they are not the complete picture.

According to the [research conducted by Neff and Dahm at the University of Texas](#), self-compassion consists of:

- “*Self-kindness*: Our inner dialogues [about ourselves] are gentle and encouraging rather than harsh and belittling.”
  - “*Common humanity*: [We know] “that everyone fails, makes mistakes, and gets it wrong sometimes [even us...and that’s OK].”
  - “*Mindfulness*: When we have “mindful awareness of our negative thoughts and emotions so that they are approached with balance and equanimity....[then] we can recognize that our thoughts and feelings are just that—thoughts and feelings—helping us to drop our unquestioning belief in the storyline of our inadequate, worthless selves.”
2. **Embrace Gratitude.** Gratitude is one of the most powerful ways to shift our perspective on what can be an otherwise stressful situation and adjust our attitude to one of joyfulness and inner peace. Having gratitude — for what we have and looking for the silver linings in the less-than-ideal situations — sparks feelings of optimism, peace, and enthusiasm, which keep us grounded on this trek as a peaceful warrior.

Dr. Robert Emmons, professor of psychology and researcher at the University of California–Davis, completed [extensive research](#) in the area of the effects of gratitude on our emotional and physical wellbeing. His overall finding has been that gratitude is what

gives life meaning. Among his discoveries was that people who kept gratitude journals felt physically healthier and had a more optimistic perspective.

Yet, an attitude of gratitude is something that we must consciously cultivate. Buy yourself a special journal for your gratitudes. Write down three to five things, big or small, daily that you feel grateful for. See how you feel at the end of one week of keeping this journal.

3. **Find Your Peace in the Midst of Chaos.** Connecting with your inner peace is crucial to maintaining both your mental and physical well-being. To make good decisions about your loved one's care, whether they are near or far, and/or to provide support for any siblings or loved ones who are helping with the care, it's important to find a way to create calm for yourself. This is often not easy, but it's worth the effort. Even if you can only spare five minutes to focus on yourself, it will be beneficial. Here are some options:
  - *Breathing:* Try *Box Breathing*, a breathing technique to reset your nervous system and induce a sense of calm. Sit comfortably with a straight, yet relaxed, spine. Inhale slowly to the count of four, noticing your breath as it comes in and fills your abdomen like a balloon. Hold your in-breath for a count of four. Exhale slowly, also to the count of four. Hold your out-breath for a count of four. Repeat this process for four cycles, then increase to eight cycles when you feel comfortable. Even a few minutes of deep, slow breaths can help center your mind and provide a sense of calm amidst the demands of caregiving.
  - *One-minute meditations:* Several one-minute meditations throughout the day will have a very powerful effect on your emotional wellbeing. Here are a few apps to check out: UCLA Mindful, Headspace, and Calm. There are others that you can find with a Google search.
  - *Visualization:* Envision yourself surrounded by a white light and filled with a golden light. Or picture yourself as a mountain, standing solid on the earth. Take some slow, deep breaths in and let them out slowly.
  - *Listen to the sound of ocean waves.* Set the rhythm of your breath to the rhythm of the waves.

4. **Connect with Nature.** Did you ever notice that a walk on the beach or in a park will completely shift your attitude when you're feeling stressed? Getting out in nature can be one of the most powerful ways to shift our mood, lift it when we're feeling down, or calm ourselves when we're feeling anxious or stressed. The Japanese practice forest bathing, *known as shinrin-yoku*, is believed to reduce stress and anxiety, boost the immune system, improve concentration, focus, and sleep, and enhance creativity and energy. Simply find a place away from the hustle and bustle, be present, and observe your surroundings with all of your senses.

Here are a few suggestions:

- Take a walk in a park or near a lake, river, or ocean, or take a hike in the mountains.
- Hug a tree. Or, sit with your back up against the tree, feeling the calming energy emanating from it.
- Plant a garden or some indoor plants.
- Stroke and talk to a pet.
- Look at the moon. Author [Terry Hershey](#) suggests in his book, *The Power of Pause*, in order to reduce stress, look at the moon, if you can. "Stare at it and breathe in, breathe out. Think of this moonlight bathing your whole life — even the parts that are disorganized and unfinished."
- If you can't get outside, look out the window (as long as you're not looking at a brick wall!) or at a photograph of a nature scene. Spend time meditating as you gaze at it. Or close your eyes and imagine that you're floating on a giant leaf and gently drifting along with the slow current of a lazy river.

Again, the benefits of connecting with nature are numerous — all of which will also help with sharper thinking and better judgment on the caregiver journey, as well as to connect to purpose and joy, which often translates to *passion*.

5. **Seek Purpose Beyond Caregiving...and in the Caregiver Journey.** While caregiving is a significant role, it's essential to nurture other aspects of your identity. Engaging in

hobbies, volunteering, or pursuing personal goals can provide a sense of meaning and purpose.

You can also find purpose in your role as a caregiver by joining or starting a Family Council if your loved one lives in a long-term care community, such as an assisted living facility or a nursing home. Family Councils will not only be a place to receive support, but they will also provide an opportunity to seek a greater purpose by helping create changes in the community that benefit all residents. (For more information about how to start a Family Council, check out my blog, [How to Start a Family Council](#).) Some states also have Statewide Family Councils. You can find out if your state has one by going to the website of your state's [Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program](#). Getting involved in statewide or national policies regarding care for our elderly can be a great way to, not only help to improve the quality of care for your loved one, but for the elderly around the country, and will contribute to feeling purposeful and passionate.

6. **Practice Forgiveness.** Caregivers tend to be extremely hard on themselves. Berating yourself for making a mistake, which you're bound to do, isn't helpful to anyone, especially yourself. You're trying your very best to care for your loved one, whether they live with you, down the street, or reside on the other side of the country. Losing your patience and becoming irritable with your loved one or with medical professionals, family members, friends, or other well-meaning (or not) people around you, will not help you to be a better caregiver, nor will it help you to remain healthy in body and mind or to feel passionate about life while going through this difficult journey of caregiving.

We all make mistakes. We're human. If you can learn from the mistake and figure out how to do it better next time, then that's the best outcome. In the words of Maya Angelou, "When we know better, we do better." Make amends to anyone you might have hurt and *forgive yourself*. When you forgive yourself, you're choosing *love*. It's then a lot easier to feel loving toward others in your life and the world around you. And it turns your own caregiving into a labor of love, aka *passion*.

Practicing the Ho‘oponopono, an ancient Hawaiian practice, is also highly effective. Envision the person you’ve hurt or offended and say, “I’m sorry. Please forgive me. Thank you. I love you.”

*You are not alone.* There are many people just like yourself who are dealing with the same issues, the same feelings, the same ups and downs, and even the same sense of isolation. If you reach out to connect with those people, you will not only benefit from having social connection — what all humans require for emotional and physical wellness — but you’ll likely learn some things that can help you with your caregiving journey. A great place to start is by joining or organizing a Family Council, joining a caregiver support group, or seeking out people with whom you feel aligned through caregiver groups on social media.

7. **Incorporate Humor.** Depression and anxiety have been identified as causes of a myriad of physical illnesses, including increased risk of hypertension, high cholesterol (as well as other risk factors associated with heart attacks and stroke), lowered immune functioning, migraine headaches, ulcers, lowered libido, asthma, onset of diabetes, osteoporosis, and exacerbation of conditions, such as cancer, arthritis, chronic pain, and diabetes. Frightening, right! But there is an antidote.

Humor is one of the most powerful ways of interfering with the stress of caregiving before it creates the downward spiral of energy-zapping thoughts that lead to depression and anxiety. Laughter creates positive emotions, such as joy, amusement, hope, confidence, and overall wellbeing, even in the face of a very real stressful situation, helping us to be more resilient to the stress. In addition, laughter has a direct impact on our body and helps prevent the decline into disease. In the short term, laughter helps stabilize blood pressure, massages the inner organs, stimulates circulation, improves digestion, increases oxygen supply to the muscles, and reduces muscle tension. In the longer term, laughter boosts the power of the immune system by reducing damaging stress hormones, such as cortisol, adrenaline, and noradrenaline.

Some of the added bonuses of laughter include: enhancing creativity, and reducing physical pain by releasing endorphins in our brain. Sharing laughter with your loved ones can improve communication and deepen your relationships.

Humor has the unique power to brighten even the darkest situation. So, make it a point to laugh every day, by:

- Laughing at yourself, rather than criticizing yourself for any mistakes you might have made.
- Looking for the comic absurdity of a difficult situation.
- Watching a funny movie.
- Reading a funny book.
- Sharing a funny story with your loved one.

8. **Take Care of the Basics.** Caregivers often focus a majority of their time and attention on the person they're caring for, frequently leaving little time to take care of themselves, including their diet. Grabbing fast food on the run or soothing yourselves with sugary foods only causes more stress for you to deal with and increases the risk of health problems for you! Remember, if you don't take care of yourself, you won't be there to provide care for your loved one if you become ill. Food is your fuel. If you don't fill up on quality fuel, your energy level will tank.

To maintain your health and energy, it is essential to consume more whole foods, including fresh fruits and vegetables. It will also improve your outlook on life. Research has also demonstrated a direct correlation between the quantity of fresh fruits and vegetables consumed and our mood. Individuals who consume more fresh produce have been found to be more likely to feel calmer, happier, and more energetic than those who eat less of these nutrient-dense foods. So, add some fresh fruits and veggies to each meal and cut down on processed foods, such as fast food and packaged foods, and you'll have more energy to take care of what needs to be taken care of, *as well as* more vitality and joy throughout your day.

9. **Get Moving!** We also need to move our bodies in order to stay healthy, have energy, and feel peaceful and, even joyful, while we take care of our responsibilities, no matter how big or small they may be. In addition to slowing down the aging process of our bodies, increasing our strength and stamina, and helping to prevent illnesses associated with obesity by aiding in weight loss, regular exercise improves mood and decreases the risk of stress-related illnesses. It's important to make time to move your body so that you can be at your best for your loved ones and for yourself.

Walk, dance, bike ride, do yoga, or whatever you enjoy most to move your body. Common sense suggests starting slowly and gradually increasing to more strenuous exercise and longer exercise periods as you build strength and stamina. Additionally, it's essential to undergo a comprehensive medical examination before starting any new exercise program. Be sure to meet with a trainer or teacher if you're starting a new form of exercise to make sure that you're doing it correctly, so that you don't injure yourself.

These tips will help you stay well and cultivate joy, vitality, and inner peace, allowing you to be the best caregiver possible, as well as the best *version of yourself*. By integrating some, or all, of these strategies into your daily routine, you can cultivate a passionate and fulfilling life while providing care for your loved one.

For more in-depth guidance, consider exploring my book, [\*The Passionate Life: Creating Vitality and Joy at Any Age\*](#), which offers comprehensive strategies for living a vibrant and purposeful life, regardless of your age.