

OASIS · AT A GLANCE

Caregiver burnout vs exhaustion: self-assessment and action plan

Exhaustion is what a night of sleep and a real meal can fix. Burnout is when a week of sleep and a beach vacation would not touch it. The difference matters. Here is how to tell them apart before one becomes the other.

BY JIM PALASTY · 12 MIN READ · CAREGIVER HEALTH

2 hrs

EXTRA DAILY LABOR

Mothers of autistic adults spend two more hours per day in caregiving than mothers of neurotypical peers. Every day. For life.

How it works

THREE STEPS

STEP 1

Notice the difference



STEP 2

Take the assessment



STEP 3

Build the plan

Symptom differential: exhaustion vs burnout

Sleep	Trouble falling / Do not want to
Energy	Depleted / Absent
Motivation	Want to but cannot / Do not want to
Mood	Irritable / Numb or rageful
Physical	Achy / Chronic pain, weight change
Social	Want quiet / Avoid all people
Work	Slower / No investment
Recovery	Rest fixes / Rest does not touch it

A STORY WE KNOW

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Deborah cared for her autistic adult son Michael for twenty-two years. She thought she was tired. She was not tired. She was burned out, and when the case manager finally asked her the question, When was the last time you slept without a monitor on, she cried for forty-five minutes. She started respite the following week. Not because Michael needed it. Because she did.

YOU ARE THE CARE PLAN

What matters, at a glance

Exhaustion

Body says stop. Mind still cares. Rest works. Meal and sleep help within days.

Burnout

Mind says stop caring. Body has forgotten how to rest. Rest does not touch it. Structural change is the only fix.

Warning signs

Crying in the car. Fantasizing about disappearing. Rage at small things. New physical symptoms. Isolation from friends.

Respite as medicine

Respite is not vacation. It is prescribed care for the caregiver. Frame it that way with insurance, family, and yourself.

Micro-breaks

Five minutes of deep breathing every two hours. Cheaper than antidepressants and works while you wait for one to kick in.

Asking for help

Specific requests get answered. I need help does not. Take her to the pharmacy Thursday at four does.

BRING THESE · CHECK AS YOU GO

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| ☐ Six hours of respite (paid, unpaid, or traded) | ☐ Two 30-minute walks outdoors |
| ☐ One meal outside the house | ☐ Three phone calls with adults not about caregiving |
| ☐ One appointment for yourself | ☐ Ninety minutes with no one asking anything of you |
| ☐ Sleep goal of seven hours per night | ☐ A bedtime you protect |

YOUR MOVE

When the self-assessment says burnout, here is what you do

- 1 Tell one person out loud. Anyone. This is the step people skip.
- 2 Get a physical. Blood pressure, thyroid, iron. Rule out medical causes.
- 3 Schedule respite starting this month. Six hours a week, non-negotiable.
- 4 Say no to one non-essential thing. This week. Cancel it.
- 5 See a therapist who works with caregivers. Not a great listener friend.
- 6 Reassess in ninety days. The score has to change or the plan has to.

If these read as luxuries, that is a symptom.

RESOURCES NAMED IN THIS POST

archrespite.org/respitelocator · <https://archrespite.org/respitelocator/>

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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