

TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF TOO

BY SHARON SALZBERG

I HAVE BEEN INVOLVED for several years in a program run by the Garrison Institute, bringing the tools of meditation and yoga to domestic violence shelter workers, and then to shelter supervisors and directors. These people are very much on the front lines of suffering, dealing daily with their clients' issues of betrayal, heartbreak, fear, anger, humiliation. They might be survivors of trauma themselves. They might receive very little institutional support. They inevitably rely on inner resiliency to sustain their work over the long term. Our premise has been that balance of heart and mind is a key to that resiliency, and that one great avenue to cultivating this balance is meditation practice.

In a challenging environment, facing our own or others' suffering, we need to draw on inner resources or on something larger than the immediate situation. Meditation helps us see our own difficult mind states—such as anger or fear or a sense of helplessness—with compassion instead of self-judgment. It also provides a refuge during life's storms by helping us connect compassionately with others, no matter the circumstances. Especially in times of uncertainty or pain, meditation broadens our perspective and deepens our courage. The spaciousness of mind and greater ease of heart that naturally arise through balanced awareness and compassion are fundamental components of a resilient spirit.

A few years ago I was set to do a five-week course on loving-kindness meditation at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. The program director, Grace, and I planned the



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course and decided to ask everyone attending to undertake a service project: helping out in a soup kitchen, serving the homeless, volunteering in a hospice—something along those lines. But once the notice about the course went out, people began calling Grace, saying things like “I’d like to volunteer somewhere, but in addition to working I’m taking care of my mother with Alzheimer’s, can that count?” “I have young children, and am overwhelmed as it is...can I possibly count that as my service?”

As Grace recounted these phone calls to me, I felt quite embarrassed at having missed how much caregiving so many do every day

with no fanfare, perhaps no title, and often no remuneration. Ever since then I’ve tried to be consciously inclusive when I consider who is a caregiver. When I led a retreat at the Insight Meditation Society especially for caregivers, this breadth was very evident: we had mothers and fathers and spouses and nurses and hospice workers and sons and daughters and therapists and chaplains and medics and so many more. What was so striking to me, along with the evident fatigue many felt, was how often they regarded their service, however difficult or frustrating, as a privilege. It was a beautiful testament to their hearts. It also struck me that for anyone in a continuing

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caregiving role, even though they have all the goodheartedness in the world, burnout is the specter that hovers close.

Some years ago, on the request of Roshi Joan Halifax, I wrote the following loving-kindness meditation especially for caregivers, in honor of their incredible work, and it was published in my book, *The Kindness Handbook*.

Whether you care for a young child, an aging parent, a rambunctious teenager, a client at work who feels helpless, any skillful relationship of caregiving relies on balance—the balance between opening one's heart endlessly and accepting the limits of what one can do. The balance between compassion and equanimity. Compassion is the trembling or the quivering of the heart in response to suffering. Equanimity is a spacious stillness that can accept things as they are. The balance of compassion and equanimity allows us to care, and yet not get overwhelmed and unable to cope because of that caring.

The phrases we use reflect this balance. Choose one or two phrases that are personally meaningful to you. There are

some options offered below. You can alter them in any way, or use others that you have created out of their unique personal significance.

To begin the practice, take as comfortable a position as possible, sitting or lying down. Take a few deep soft breaths to let your body settle. Bring your attention to your breath, and begin to silently say your chosen phrases over and over again, in rhythm with the breath. You can also experiment with just having your attention settle in the phrases, without using the anchor of the breath. Feel the meaning of what you are saying, yet without trying to force anything. Let the practice carry you along.

May I offer my care and presence without conditions, knowing they may be met by gratitude, anger or indifference.

May I find the inner resources to truly be able to give.

May I remain in peace, and let go of expectations.

May I offer love, knowing I can't control the course of life, suffering, or death.

I care about your pain, yet cannot control it.

I wish you happiness and peace, but cannot make your choices for you.

May I see my limits compassionately, just as I view the limitations of others. ♡