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## Breaking the chain of self-sacrifice

By Rebecca Cohen - Chronicle columnist

We all make choices every day. And, for every choice we make, there are consequences. If we are honest with ourselves about the motivation that drives our choices, we can gain health. If we keep fooling ourselves, health may be unattainable until we are willing to look in the mirror. This is true for every aspect of our life, including care-giving.

Women have inherited a cultural and personal legacy of self-sacrifice that has been passed down to us for generations. We are taught to sacrifice ourselves for others and that what we do is a noble and courageous act. We are socialized to value our contribution to our family and social group more than we value ourselves and our relationship with our soul. We desire to be good daughters, good mothers, and good wives so we ignore our need to care for ourselves. The resulting competition between all of these conflicting desires is that we wreak havoc with our health.

There is a difference between "care" and "overcare." Providing true care to others from a place of unconditional love does not cause burnout and depletion, it enhances our health. Over-care is motivated by guilt and unfinished business. Somehow we hope to compensate through the care-giving role. Ask yourself how you feel when you care for others? Do you need to do things for others in order to feel good and/or loved? Are you afraid to delegate to others because you fear that they will resent you and not love you as much, or think you are lazy? Each of us needs to examine what we get from martyring ourselves.

In order to truly care for others, we must care for ourselves first. When you get on a plane, the first thing the flight attendant says is that parents should always put the oxygen mask on themselves before helping the children. The reason is simple: if you pass out from lack of oxygen, you can't help anyone. The same holds true for ourselves each day. If we take care of everyone else but ourselves, not only does our health suffer, but we also become resentful, angry and terribly stressed. Something feels out of balance in our life and we may believe that we, and our needs, don't matter to anyone. We experience a huge disconnect within ourselves. And, worse, the negative energy of resentment and anger can not be hidden from people, especially children who have a keen sense of how people feel. We often can't explain it, but we know that the person caring for us, or doing this work, doesn't want to be there and the activity is really an imposition in their lives. How does this bring peace, love or caring to anyone's life?

**Caring for yourself is not selfish; it is a necessity to allow you to do those things that you love. If you are over-caring, here are some things you can do to refocus.**

1. Learn how to delegate and ask for help.
2. Set healthy boundaries and limits, and be firm about your need to have help from other family members or co-workers.

3. Make plans to avoid the emergency care-giving that seemingly “just happens,” but in reality was set in motion by your beliefs and choices. Think about what you will do when your parents get older and need help, when work interferes with child care, when you need to do something for yourself.
4. Incorporate activities that give you pleasure. e.g., listen to music, work in the garden, engage in a hobby.
5. Take a warm bath and light candles. Find some time for a manicure or a massage.
6. Eat balanced meals, find time to exercise even if it's a short walk, and do the best you can to sleep at least 7 hours a night.
7. Whenever you can, try to find some humor in everyday situations.
8. Keep a journal. Write down your thoughts and feelings.
9. Try to set a time for afternoons or evenings out. Seek out friends and family to help you so that you can have some time away from the home. And, if it is difficult to leave, invite friends and family over to visit with you.
10. Join a support group. Seek out people who are going through the same experiences that you are living each day. If you can't leave the house, many Internet services are available.
11. If you are taking care of sick or elderly parents, find time for positive, nurturing interactions with others. It may seem impossible, but you owe it to yourself to find time for you.

If what you care about is causing you stress, then it could be that you have crossed the line from care to over-care. Give yourself permission not to be perfect ... you're doing the best you can.