Symptoms of Caregiver Burnout

A primary caregiver demonstrating any of the following may be headed for caregiver burnout:

- Disrupted sleep patterns, including insomnia or habitually oversleeping, never feeling rested, even when the primary caregiver has managed to have a full night’s sleep; sleep troubled by disturbing dreams or nightmares
- Altered eating patterns, including not being able to eat or overeating; significant weight gain or loss
- Increased sugar consumption or use of alcohol or drugs
- Increased smoking or a strong desire to start again after having quit
- Frequent headaches or sudden onset of back pain; increased reliance on over-the-counter pain remedies or prescribed drugs
- Irritability
- High levels of fear or anxiety
- Impatience
- The ability to handle one or more problems or crises
- Overreacting to criticism
- Overreacting with anger toward a spouse, child or older care recipient
- Alienation, even from those who offer relief and help
- Feeling emotional withdrawal
- Feeling trapped
- Thinking of disappearing or running away
- Not being able to laugh or feel joy
- Withdrawing from activities and the lives of others around the caregiver
- Feeling hopeless most of the time
- Loss of compassion
- Resenting the care recipient and / or the situation
- Neglecting or mistreating the care recipient
- Frequently feeling totally alone, even though friends and family are present
- Wishing simply “to have the whole thing over with”
- Playing the “if only” game: Saying over and over “If only this would happen” or “If only this hadn’t happened”
- Loss of hope, purpose and meaning
- Thinking of suicide as a means of escape

Adapted with permission from Preventing Caregiver Burnout, James R. Sherman, Ph.D. Pathway Books, 1994, pp 7, 11-12