

# WHEN YOU CAN'T SLEEP

A Practical Guide for Caregivers (and Others) Who Collapse  
into Bed Exhausted But Can't Shut Their Brain Off

waking up  
every night  
again?

so exhausted...  
all the time

30+  
PRACTICAL  
TOOLS

TO HELP YOUR  
MIND AND BODY



ASA DIGITAL

# A Note Before We Begin

**T**his book was written with you in mind. Not the ideal caregiver. Not someone who has already found balance. Not someone who does yoga in the morning and meditates at night. You — the person reading these words, maybe at 11 p.m. because you can't fall asleep. Or at 3 a.m. because you woke up and your brain is already spinning. You won't find motivational quotes here. No advice that starts with "just love yourself more." No one telling you that you can get through this if you just believe hard enough. What you will find are practical tools. Small things you can do tonight. And someone who genuinely understands how hard what you're going through really is.

*This book is not a substitute for professional support.  
If you are going through a crisis, please talk to your doctor  
or a mental health professional.*

# Introduction

## Why This Book Exists

Every year, millions of Americans care for an aging parent, a sick spouse, or a loved one living with dementia or a chronic illness. Most of them are women. Most of them don't sleep enough. And almost none of them talk openly about what it's really like.

Not the real darkness. Not the insomnia that isn't just "not sleeping enough" — it's waking up at 3 a.m. with your heart pounding, your to-do list already scrolling behind your eyes.

Not the feeling that you can never truly clock out. That you're always on call, even in your sleep. Like a phone that never gets turned off, even when you desperately want to power down.

This book exists because that feeling has a name. It has causes. And most importantly, it has solutions — small, real, accessible ones, even when you're running on empty.

## Why So Many Caregivers Can't Sleep

The short answer: because your nervous system doesn't know it's safe to.

When you spend months — often years — in a state of constant alertness, your body adapts. It learns to stay awake. It learns to monitor. It learns to stay ready for the next emergency.

Then night comes. You lie down. But your body doesn't receive the signal that it's safe to lower its guard — because it never received that signal during the day.

Add to this the mental weight: the morning medications, the doctor's appointment to schedule, the home health aide who can't come Thursday, the sibling who hasn't returned your texts, the guilt from snapping at your loved one last night.

Bed becomes the place where all of this suddenly arrives. During the day you're too busy to think about it. At night, finally still, your brain unloads everything at once.

## You Are Not Broken

One important thing before we go further.

If you can't sleep, it's not because you're naturally anxious. It's not because you're weak. It's not because you don't know how to relax.

It's because you're doing something enormously hard, and your body is responding in direct proportion to what you're living through.

Caregiver insomnia is not a character flaw. It's a physiological response to prolonged stress. It makes complete sense that your brain works this way. What doesn't make sense is being left to manage it alone.

## **Exhaustion Is Not a Moral Failing**

You're tired. Maybe exhausted. Maybe so far past exhausted that you can't even feel the tiredness anymore, just a kind of hollow numbness. And maybe you feel guilty about that. As if you're not tough enough. As if someone who truly loves another person never gets tired. The truth is different: your exhaustion is not a measure of your love. It's a measure of how much you're giving. And you are giving an enormous amount. Being tired doesn't mean you're failing. It means you're carrying real weight.

# Chapter 1: Why Your Brain Won't Stop Working

It's 10:30 p.m. Your mom is asleep. The house is quiet. You finally get to put your head on the pillow. And then — no. Your brain fires up. Was the cardiology appointment Thursday or Friday? The blood pressure meds — are there two left or three? Did you call the primary care office for the refill? The home health aide said she can't come on the 15th, but the 15th is also your kid's parent-teacher conference. And your brother hasn't responded to your texts in three days.

## **Hypervigilance: Your Brain Is Doing Its Job**

Hypervigilance is the state in which your brain stays constantly “on” — listening, alert, ready to respond.

In caregivers, it develops almost automatically. When someone depends on you — when getting it wrong has real consequences — your nervous system learns to never fully stand down.

During the day, this is functional: it keeps you attentive, reactive, able to handle the unexpected. At night, it becomes a problem: your body is in bed, but your mind is still “on duty.”

*Think of it like working a night security shift.*

*Your shift ends, but your body never got the signal to clock out.*

*So it stays awake, listening.*

## **The Responsibility That Never Switches Off**

One of the things that sets family caregiving apart from almost every other role is that it never truly ends.

A hospital physician finishes a shift and hands off to someone else. A teacher leaves school. You don't. Even when you're not actively doing anything, you're always “available.” Even when you sleep, you're the one who gets up if something happens.

This permanent availability carries an enormous cost for your nervous system. Real rest isn't possible when there is no moment when you're truly “off.”

# Why Your Brain Won't Stop Working

## **The Fear of Forgetting Something**

“What if I forget something important?” This is one of the most common fears among caregivers — and it has real roots. There are medications to give, appointments to schedule, symptoms to watch. A mistake can have real consequences. So your brain, trying to protect you, starts running through the checklist constantly. It’s like having a mental to-do list that reopens every time you try to close it. At night, with no distractions, that list becomes deafening.

## **The Loop: The Same Thought, Over and Over**

You know that feeling of thinking the same thing ten times in a row without getting anywhere? “I need to call the doctor tomorrow.” “I need to remember that.” “What if I forget?” “I should write it down.” “But where?” “What if I lose the paper?” “I need to call the doctor tomorrow.” This isn’t a memory problem. It’s that the brain can’t “file” a task until it’s either completed or stored somewhere safe. Looping through it is your brain’s way of not letting it get lost. Practical fix: externalize your thoughts. A physical notebook, a note in your phone, a sticky note on the nightstand. It doesn’t matter where — what matters is that your brain knows the information is safe somewhere outside your head.

## **The Constant Listening**

How many times do you wake up at night convinced you heard something? A noise, a moan, a breathing pattern that sounds different? The caregiver brain learns to monitor even during sleep. This produces frequent wake-ups, light sleep, difficulty reaching deeper sleep stages. Over time, even during calm nights, the brain stays on guard. It learned that this is its job — and it doesn’t know how to stop.

# Chapter 2: The Advice That Makes Things Worse

## The Advice That Makes Things Worse

There's a whole repertoire of well-meaning advice that people will offer you — advice you'll listen to while quietly fighting the urge to roll your eyes. Let's look at it honestly. Not to complain about the people who say these things — they usually mean well — but to understand why it doesn't help, and what's really going on underneath.

### “Sleep When They Sleep”

Sounds logical. For most caregivers, it's actually **impossible**.

- Their sleep schedules may be unpredictable, fragmented, and brief. You can't build your own rest on such an unstable foundation.
- The time when they're sleeping is often the only window you have to take care of everything else: return calls, eat a warm meal, have five minutes of quiet.
- Even if you wanted to, your body won't fall asleep on command — especially when you're in a state of alert, or you know you could be woken up any moment.

This advice completely ignores the logistical and physiological reality of the role.



# The Advice That Makes Things Worse

## “Just Relax”

The most useless advice. And also the most frustrating. If relaxing on command were possible, you would have already done it. The problem isn't a lack of willingness — it's that your nervous system is in a state of chronic activation that doesn't respond to instructions. Telling someone in chronic stress to “just relax” is like telling someone who hasn't eaten in hours to “just not be hungry.”



## “Think Positive”

This advice has a paradoxical effect: beyond not helping, it can actually make you feel worse. Because if you can't think positive, it must mean you're doing something wrong, right? Wrong. It doesn't mean anything of the sort. Negative nighttime thoughts — fear, worry, sadness — are not character defects. They're realistic responses to a hard situation. Suppressing them doesn't make them disappear: it pushes them underground, where they keep working.

# The Advice That Makes Things Worse

## “Take Time for Yourself”

Perhaps the most commonly heard phrase — and the one that generates the most frustration. Not because it’s wrong in itself. The problem is how it’s said: as if it were simple, as if you just need to decide to do it. Nobody explains how. Nobody helps with the “who covers things while I’m gone” question. Nobody offers concrete help. So the advice remains a lovely, unachievable idea that only makes you feel guilty for not managing to take care of yourself. “Self-care” only works when someone else is handling everything else while you do it. Without that part, it’s just a nice phrase that goes nowhere.

## “You Need to Unplug”

Absolutely true. But unplug from what, exactly, when the situation continues even while you’re away? Caregivers who take an evening out often spend it checking their phones, waiting for the call, imagining what might happen. Physically somewhere else, mentally still right there. Real disengagement isn’t geographic. It’s a state of the nervous system that you only reach when you genuinely feel — truly feel — that things are under control without you.



# Chapter 3: 10 Things That Make Nights Worse

## 10 Things That Make Nights Worse

Some habits and situations seem harmless but can make your nights significantly harder. Here they are, one by one — with what you can do instead.

### 1. Using Your Phone in Bed

The screen light suppresses melatonin. But more than that, the content — texts, news alerts, social media — keeps your brain in active processing mode.

*Instead: Charge your phone outside the bedroom, or at least face-down and on silent. Keep only a small notebook by your bed for thoughts.*

### 2. Running Through Tomorrow's To-Do List

It feels productive, but it isn't. Reviewing tasks doesn't complete them — it amplifies anxiety without providing solutions.

*Instead: Before bed, write everything down on paper. Not to organize, just to empty. Your brain can let go of what it knows is written somewhere safe.*

### 3. Having Difficult Conversations in the Evening

Tough conversations — with family members, with your care team, even just in your own head — activate your nervous system. Done in the evening, they leave your brain unable to settle before sleep.

*Instead: Put difficult conversations off until morning, when you're more rested (even relatively). If a heavy thought comes up in the evening, write it down: "I'll deal with this tomorrow."*

### 4. Coffee or Caffeinated Drinks After 2 p.m.

Caffeine has a half-life of 5–7 hours. A 4 p.m. coffee is still partly active at 11 p.m. For someone already in a state of heightened alertness, the effect is amplified.

*Instead: Switch to caffeine-free drinks after lunch — herbal teas like chamomile, valerian root, or lemon balm. They're not miraculous, but they won't work against your sleep.*

### 5. Not Eating Enough During the Day

Many caregivers skip meals or eat poorly during the day. By evening, the body is in blood sugar imbalance — which worsens anxiety and makes it hard to sleep.

# 10 Things That Make Nights Worse

*Instead: A light snack 1–2 hours before bed can stabilize blood sugar. Something simple: crackers with cheese, a banana, yogurt.*

## 6. Irregular Sleep Times

Going to bed at wildly different times disrupts your circadian rhythm. Your body can't prepare for sleep if it doesn't know when to expect it.

*Instead: Even if it's hard, try to go to bed within the same one-hour window every night. Consistency helps your body anticipate sleep.*

## 7. Bright Light in the Evening

The white or blue light from home lamps, the TV, and computers suppresses melatonin production for up to two hours before sleep.

*Instead: After 8 p.m., dim the lights in your home. Warm-toned or soft lighting. It's not a miracle fix, but it helps signal to your body that night is approaching.*

## 8. Keeping Everything in Your Head

Going directly from activity or screens to trying to sleep is asking your brain for too sudden a jump. It can't make it.

*Instead: Create even just 15 minutes of transition. It doesn't need to be elaborate — just something that requires no mental processing: a slow walk around the house, a shower, some quiet music.*

## 9. Going Straight from “Doing Things” to “Trying to Sleep”

Going directly from activity or screens to trying to sleep is asking your brain for too sudden a jump. It can't make it.

*Instead: Create even just 15 minutes of transition. It doesn't need to be elaborate — just something that requires no mental processing: a slow walk around the house, a shower, some quiet music.*

## 10. Believing You Have to Sleep Perfectly

The pressure of “I have to sleep” makes insomnia worse. Your brain interprets this pressure as a threat and activates further.

*Instead: Change the goal. Not “I have to sleep” but “I want to rest.” Simply lying still in the dark, doing nothing, has value. It's not sleeping — but it's not wasted time either.*

# Chapter 4: I Woke Up at 3 A.M.

## Mi sono svegliata alle 3

It's 3:17 a.m. Total silence — but your head is already loud. You slept maybe two hours, maybe three. You wake up for no clear reason — or maybe you heard a sound, or maybe your body just decided it was time. And now you're awake in the dark, and the thoughts are all arriving at once.

## Why You Wake Up at 3 A.M.

Early morning waking is one of the most common sleep disturbances during periods of prolonged stress. There's a biological basis: in the early morning hours, cortisol levels (the stress hormone) naturally begin to rise to prepare the body for the day. In people already in a state of chronic stress, this spike comes earlier, is higher, and is enough to break sleep. You're not doing anything wrong. Your nervous system is responding to weeks or months of overload.

## The Darkness Anxiety

At night, without distractions, thoughts amplify. Worries feel bigger. Problems feel unsolvable. The future feels heavier. This isn't because the problems have changed. It's because at night, the brain is in a state of heightened threat-detection — an evolutionary mechanism that kept us alert during vulnerable hours. Don't put too much trust in the thoughts you have at 3 a.m. They're not clearer than other thoughts — they're just louder.

## The Thought Spiral

One thought pulls in another. From tomorrow's doctor's visit, to the appointment you missed, to the treatment that isn't working, to the end that's approaching, to the future you can't picture. How do you stop this mechanism? Not by forcing it to stop. That doesn't work. The harder you try not to think about something, the more you think about it. It works better to intercept it and redirect. Some simple techniques:

- **Write it down.** Even just a single sentence. Even just the main thought. Getting it out of your head reduces its power.
- **Count slowly backward from 300.** Not meditation — just a task difficult enough to occupy the analytical part of your brain.

# I Woke Up at 3 A.M.

- **Focus on something sensory:** the temperature of the pillow, the sound of your breathing, the weight of the blanket. Not to “relax” — just to give your brain something concrete to rest on.

## The Fear of Tomorrow

*“How am I going to function tomorrow if I sleep this little?”* This fear is real. And it makes sense. You have real responsibilities, and exhaustion makes everything harder. But this worry, at night, doesn’t help. It doesn’t solve anything. In fact, it raises your activation level and makes falling back asleep even harder. What to do instead: Defer the problem. Literally. Tell yourself: “I’ll think about this tomorrow morning. Tonight I don’t have the resources to solve it.” This isn’t giving up — it’s choosing the right time to face things.

## The Loneliness of 3 A.M.

This is one of the least-named aspects of caregiver insomnia: the sense of being completely alone with all of this. Everyone is asleep. You’re awake. And the one thing you need to do — the thing that would help you keep going — is the thing you can’t do. There’s no simple way to eliminate this feeling. But some things can help:

- Remember that thousands of people are going through exactly this, right now, tonight.
- Keep something comforting nearby — physically. A book. A soft blanket. A mug of something warm.
- Write to someone you don’t need to wake up: a message you’ll send tomorrow, a letter you’ll never send. Writing breaks the isolation even when it’s just for yourself.

# I Woke Up at 3 A.M.

## Simple Exercises for 3 A.M.

### 4-7-8 Breathing

Inhale for 4 seconds. Hold for 7. Exhale slowly for 8. Repeat three or four times. Not magic — but it activates the parasympathetic nervous system (the one that calms things down) and gives your brain something to focus on beyond thoughts.



# I Woke Up at 3 A.M.

## Simple Body Scan

Starting from your feet, slowly move your attention upward — ankles, calves, knees, thighs — noticing without judging every sensation. You're not trying to relax: you're just trying to feel. The mind tends to calm when it's occupied with the body.



## The Safe Place Method

Imagine a real or imagined place where you've felt at ease. You don't need to visualize anything elaborate — just a hint: a scent, the temperature of the air, a sound. Stay there for a few minutes.



# Chapter 5: Your Emergency Kit for Hard Nights

## Your Emergency Kit for Hard Nights

This isn't about elaborate techniques or complicated routines. It's about having something concrete to do when the night becomes unbearable. These tools work best if you prepare them when you're feeling relatively okay, so they're ready when you need them.

### The Brain Dump

Grab a piece of paper. Write everything that's in your head — no order, no logic, no editing. It's not a journal, not an organized list — it's a container. The goal isn't to solve anything. It's to move thoughts out of your head and into a physical place. Once written, your brain can stop holding them in active memory. Keep a small notebook and pen on your nightstand. Not your phone — screen light disrupts sleep.

### The Worry List

Different from the brain dump: here you split your worries into two columns. On the left: "Things I can actually do something about." On the right: "Things that are not in my control." Look at the right column. These things, tonight, you can't fix. You can't even influence them. Spending energy on them serves no purpose. Writing them in the "not in my control" column is a way of giving yourself permission to let them go — at least for tonight.



# Your Emergency Kit for Hard Nights

## Simple Breathing

No need for elaborate techniques. Just slow your exhale. Breathe in normally. Breathe out twice as slowly. If you inhale for 3 seconds, exhale for 6. Repeat for 5–10 minutes. The long exhale activates the vagus nerve, which slows your heart rate and signals to your nervous system that there's no immediate danger.

## Mental Decompression Techniques

### The 5-4-3-2-1 Method

Name (mentally or on paper): 5 things you can see, 4 things you can touch, 3 things you can hear, 2 things you can smell, 1 thing you can taste. Even better if you do it slowly, with real attention. This brings your brain into the present, out of the worry loop.

## Body Before Mind

Before trying to calm your thoughts, tend to your body. Roll your shoulders. Open and close your hands slowly. Gently move your neck. Then lie back down. The nervous system calms more easily through the body than through rational thinking.

## End-of-Day Wind-Down Rituals

Do these before bed — not during the night, but as preparation. They work best when you do them every evening, even in a shortened version.

- Write three specific things you did today (not “I cared for my mom” — something more concrete: “I gave the medications at 8, called the doctor, made a hot meal”). This helps your brain register that you did enough.
- Write one thing to defer to tomorrow. Just one. Something your brain is already trying not to forget, that you can officially put on hold.
- Do something sensory that isn't connected to caregiving: a warm shower, a cup of tea, a few minutes of music. Not to magically relax — but to signal that your shift is over.

# Chapter 6: I Only Got Two Hours. Now What?

## I Only Got Two Hours. Now What?

6:30 a.m. You slept two hours, maybe three. The day starts anyway.

This chapter is for those mornings. For when the day begins already uphill and you need to find a way to get through it without falling apart.

### First Goal: Make It to Noon

Don't think about the whole day. That's too much. Think about the next three hours. With little energy, the brain tends to catastrophize: "How am I going to do everything I have to do today?" But "everything" doesn't exist — the next three hours exist. After that, you reassess.

### Urgent vs. Non-Urgent

When you're tired, everything feels equally urgent. It's not. Simplest method: Sort the day's tasks into just two groups:

- **Urgent today:** things with real consequences if not done (medications, meals, a scheduled appointment).
- **Can wait:** everything else.

Then look at the second list. Half of those things can genuinely wait. Half could be done by someone else. Some of them might not be necessary at all.

### Reducing Mental Load

Days after a sleepless night go better with fewer decisions. Every decision uses cognitive energy.

When you're depleted, you have very little. So:

- **Reduce choices where you can:** same breakfast, same morning routine, same outfit if it doesn't matter.
- **Use pre-made checklists:** don't start from zero every time. A fixed medication list, a pre-decided morning routine.
- **Say no to everything unnecessary.** Today is not the day to make major decisions, have difficult conversations, or handle anything that can be postponed.

# I Only Got Two Hours. Now What?

## Simple Meals: Something Is Better Than Nothing

When you're tired, the temptation is to skip meals or grab whatever's nearby, usually not healthy.



You don't need to cook. You need to eat something every 3–4 hours to keep your blood sugar stable — which directly affects your mood, concentration, and emotional resilience.

- Yogurt + fruit + something crunchy
- Crackers with cheese or deli meat
- Toast with peanut butter or avocado
- Eggs — quick and nutritious in any form

Don't worry about perfect nutrition. That's a problem for another day.

## Avoiding Exhaustion Mistakes

Low-sleep days increase the risk of errors — with medications, appointments, communications.

Some practical precautions:

- **Double-check medications:** before giving them, read them again. Don't trust your memory.
- **Write it down, don't keep it in your head:** every important thing on paper or on your phone, immediately.
- **Don't drive if you're too tired:** seriously. Find an alternative.
- **Postpone major decisions:** if you can wait until tomorrow, wait.

## How to Ask for Help (For Real)

Asking for help is hard. For many caregivers, it's the hardest thing of all. But on days after a sleepless night, it's also the most strategic thing you can do. How to do it concretely:

- **Be specific.** Not "I need help" but "Can you come over at 3 p.m. for a couple hours?"
- **Ask for one thing at a time.** Vague requests get forgotten.
- **Lower your threshold.** You don't need to be in total crisis to ask. Being tired counts.

Asking for help is not weakness. It's smart resource management. Even professionals do it.

# I Only Got Two Hours. Now What?

## Survival Strategy for Hard Days

|                    |                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|--------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>MORNING</b>     | Drink something. Eat something. Do the essential things for them. Everything else can wait.                                                                                                    |
| <b>MID-MORNING</b> | Reassess. What's still urgent? What can you shift? Who can you call?                                                                                                                           |
| <b>LUNCH</b>       | Eat too. Even standing, even rushed. Even just half a sandwich. Your body needs fuel.                                                                                                          |
| <b>AFTERNOON</b>   | If there's a moment when they're sleeping or calm: sit down. You don't have to sleep, but at least stop moving. Close your eyes for 10–15 minutes (a micro-nap has real effects on alertness). |
| <b>EVENING</b>     | Scale back. Simple meal, nothing demanding. Go to bed 30 minutes earlier than usual.                                                                                                           |

**1. FIRST GOAL: MAKE IT TO LUNCHTIME**

HOW AM I GOING TO GET EVERYTHING DONE TODAY? → JUST THE NEXT 3 HOURS.

Don't think about the whole day. Just focus on the next three hours.

**2. SEPARATE WHAT'S URGENT FROM WHAT ISN'T**

**URGENT TODAY**

- ☒ MEDICATIONS
- ☒ MEALS
- ☒ SCHEDULED APPOINTMENT

**CAN WAIT**

- ☐ HOUSEWORK
- ☐ PHONE CALLS
- ☐ LAUNDRY
- ☐ EMAILS
- ☐ ...

Half of it can truly wait. Maybe someone else can do it. Or maybe it doesn't need to be done today at all.

**3. REDUCE MENTAL LOAD**

**MORNING ROUTINE**

- ☒ MEDICATIONS
- ☒ BREAKFAST
- ☒ HYGIENE
- ☒ GET DRESSED
- ☒ ...

- Reduce the number of decisions you make.
- Use prepared lists and routines.
- Say no to anything that's not essential.

**4. SIMPLE MEALS: SOMETHING IS BETTER THAN NOTHING**

Yogurt with fruit, Peanut butter toast, Pasta, Mac & cheese.

Eat something every 3–4 hours to help keep your energy and blood sugar stable.

**5. AVOID MISTAKES CAUSED BY EXHAUSTION**

**TO DO:**

- Call back.
- Appointment.
- Groceries.

Double-check your medications.

Write things down. Don't try to keep everything in your head.

Don't drive if you're too exhausted.

**POSTPONE IMPORTANT DECISIONS WHENEVER POSSIBLE.**

**6. ASK FOR HELP (FOR REAL)**

Instead of: "Can you help me sometime?"

Try: "Could you come by at 3 p.m. and stay for two hours?"

Ask for one specific thing. Lower the bar. Being exhausted counts.

Asking for help isn't weakness. It's smart resource management. Even the professionals do it.

## A SURVIVAL STRATEGY FOR THE HARDEST DAYS

# Chapter 7: The Guilt of Resting

## The Guilt of Resting

You're sitting on the couch. They're asleep. **There's nothing urgent to do right now.** And instead of staying seated, you get up. **Because sitting still feels wrong.** Because there's always something to do. **Because you don't deserve to rest when they're not doing well.**

**This is rest guilt.** And it's **one of the heaviest burdens caregivers carry.**

## Feeling Selfish When You Rest

Where does this idea that rest is selfish come from? It comes from a value system where caring for others comes before everything else — even yourself. It comes from cultural messages that celebrate sacrifice as a virtue. It comes from households where “whoever stops first has lost.” But here's the contradiction: if you don't rest, eventually you won't be able to care for anyone. Complete burnout helps neither you nor them. Rest is not the opposite of care. Rest is what makes care sustainable. You can't pour from an empty cup. It's an overused phrase — but it's true. Taking care of yourself isn't a luxury — it's maintenance.

## Feeling Guilty When You Delegate

“I should be the one doing this.” “No one will do it the way I do.” “I can't trust anyone else.” These feelings are understandable. But they deserve a closer look. First question: Is it true that no one else can do this? Or is it that you're afraid they'll do it differently than you? Different isn't always worse. And even if something was done slightly less perfectly — a meal less exact, a routine slightly off — the benefit to you might far outweigh the difference. Delegating isn't abandoning. It's distributing the weight.

# The Guilt of Resting

## Feeling Guilty When You Get Angry

Have you ever gotten angry at them? Lost your patience, snapped, felt like you were at the edge? And then felt terrible about it? Caregiver anger is completely normal. It's not cruelty. It's the physiological response to a prolonged overload. It doesn't make you a bad person. It makes you a person with a limit. And limits are human. What matters isn't never getting angry. It's how you handle the anger when it arrives — and what you do afterward.

## Feeling Guilty for Wanting a Break

"Sometimes I just wish all of this was over." "Sometimes I want to be somewhere else." "Sometimes I just want one week of peace." These thoughts are nearly universal among long-term caregivers. Almost no one admits them, because they feel like betrayals. They're not. Wanting a break from a hard situation is human. It doesn't mean you don't love the person you're caring for. It doesn't mean you want them to suffer. It means you're tired. And tiredness has the right to exist.

## An Exercise for Rest Guilt

When you feel guilty for resting, ask yourself: *"If a close friend told me she was feeling this way — guilty for sleeping, for stopping for five minutes, for asking someone else to help — what would I tell her?"* Then say that to yourself.

# Chapter 8: Small Rituals That Actually Help

## Piccoli rituali che aiutano davvero

Not wellness blogger routines. Real things that can be done in the reality of someone with limited time, limited energy, and an unpredictable home situation. Everything here can be done in 5–15 minutes. Nothing requires special equipment. Nothing assumes you've already solved your sleep problems.

### The Shift-Change Shower



Not for hygiene — as a transition ritual. Take it in the evening, after they've settled in for the night. Not because you're dirty, but because warm water is one of the simplest ways to signal to your nervous system that the day is done. It doesn't need to be long. Even five minutes. What matters is that it's a space that belongs only to you.

### Three Concrete Things

Every evening, before bed: write three concrete things you did today. Not things you expected to do and didn't — things you actually did. "Gave the medications." "Called the doctor." "Made a hot meal." Seems simple. In reality, it counteracts the tired brain's tendency to register only what wasn't done, amplifying the feeling of inadequacy.

### The Quiet Tea



Not the rushed morning — the evening, after they've gone to sleep, before you go to bed. Boil the water. Wait. Pour. Sit. Drink slowly. Don't do anything else at the same time. Not your phone, not the TV, not the mental checklist. Just the tea, the warmth of the mug, the quiet. Five minutes. Every evening, if you can.

# Small Rituals That Actually Help

## Minimum Movement



Not the gym. Not running. Not yoga if you don't like it. Ten minutes of **walking** — even inside your home. Three loops around the block. Taking the stairs. **Physical movement** lowers cortisol, improves sleep, and regulates mood. **You don't need much to feel the effect.**

## Fresh Air



A small but real detail: a few minutes of fresh air during the day improves sleep quality. You don't need to go for a walk. Just open a window, breathe some outside air, maybe look at the sky for a moment. It's a micro-break that your brain registers as "outside the situation." Small — but not useless.

## 10 Pages of Reading

Not a demanding book, not something that requires intense concentration. A light novel, a magazine — something that carries your mind somewhere else without too much effort. Ten pages before bed — or fewer, if your eyelids are closing. Reading on paper is better than a screen. And the benefit isn't just the content — it's the ritual itself.

## The Questions Notebook



Every time you think of something to ask the doctor, tell the aide, or communicate to a family member — write it down immediately. Not to be more organized. To remove these things from your head and put them somewhere physical where they won't get lost. Your brain relaxes when it knows the information is safe.

# Chapter 9: When It's About More Than Just Sleep

## When It's About More Than Just Sleep

This chapter calls for care. I write it with deep respect for what you're going through. **Sometimes insomnia is a symptom.** Sometimes there are bigger things behind it — a profound exhaustion that doesn't go away even after sleeping, a sadness you can't explain, an anxiety that has invaded even the hours when things seem relatively okay. There is nothing wrong with this. It's what can happen when you carry a very heavy weight for a very long time.

## Caregiver Burnout

**Burnout** isn't just "being tired." It's a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion that develops after a prolonged period of stress without adequate recovery. Some signs:

- Exhaustion that doesn't lift even after sleeping.
- Loss of empathy or emotional detachment from the person you're caring for — not because you don't love them, but because your nervous system has shut down as a protective mechanism.
- Feeling like you can't keep going, that you're at the edge, that there's no way out.
- Difficulty finding pleasure in things that used to bring you joy.
- Constant irritability, or on the contrary, a kind of inner emptiness.

If you recognize yourself in these signs, it doesn't mean you've failed. It means you need support — and that support exists.

## Depression and Persistent Anxiety

Depression in caregivers is far more common than most people realize — and it frequently goes unrecognized, both by the person experiencing it and by those around them. Some signs to pay attention to:

- Persistent sadness that doesn't lift, even when things are going relatively well.
- Loss of interest in things that used to matter to you.
- Difficulty concentrating, even on simple things.
- Feelings of worthlessness or persistent very negative thoughts about yourself.
- Anxiety that is present almost all the time, even without a specific trigger.

These are not signs of weakness. They are symptoms — like a fever or pain — that indicate something needs attention.

# *When It's About More Than Just Sleep*

## **When to Seek Professional Help**

There is no exact threshold. But there are some indicators that suggest talking to someone — your primary care doctor, a therapist, or a counselor:

- Sleep problems have lasted more than a month and aren't improving despite practical changes.
- You feel unable to carry out caregiving activities because of exhaustion or anxiety.
- You have persistent, very negative thoughts about yourself or the future.
- You're having difficulty eating or your relationship with food has changed significantly.
- You're using alcohol or other substances to manage stress.

Seeking help is not giving up. It's a mature, intelligent choice. There are professionals trained to support caregivers — and working with one doesn't make you less capable, it makes you better supported. You don't need to reach a breaking point to deserve support. You can ask for help now, while you're still holding on — in fact, it's better to do it now.

# Chapter 10: Things I Wish Someone Had Told Me Sooner

## Things I Wish Someone Had Told Me Sooner

This isn't a chapter of advice. It's a conversation. If I could sit down across from you — you, who has read this far — there are some things I'd want to say. Not because you don't already know them, somewhere deep down. But because sometimes the things we know need to be said out loud, by someone, to become real.

### That Exhaustion Has a Shape

**It's not just sleepiness.** Caregiver exhaustion has a precise shape: it's that feeling of always being present but never fully there. Of watching things happen as if from behind glass. Of knowing what you need to do but not having the energy to want to do it. That shape has a name. It makes sense. And it is not your fault.

### That Grief Starts Before the End

If you're caring for someone with a degenerative illness, or someone who is changing in irreversible ways, **you are already living a form of grief — even while they're still here.** You are losing pieces. The person they were. The conversations you used to have. The plans you had together. The moments when they recognized you. This anticipatory grief is real. It is exhausting. And it is nearly invisible to those around you.

### That You Can Love Someone and Wish This Were Over

**It doesn't make you a bad person.** It doesn't mean you don't love enough. It means **you're human**, and you're carrying something enormous. These two things — loving someone deeply and wishing this situation would end — can coexist. They coexist in millions of people every single day.

# Things I Wish Someone Had Told Me Sooner

## **That You Don't Have to Do This Alone**

I know you're probably doing it alone anyway. That you have a list of reasons why you can't ask for help — there's no one available, they wouldn't understand, they won't do it as well as you, I don't want to be a burden. But let me ask: if the situation were reversed — if someone else were carrying this weight — what would you want for them? You'd probably want them to ask for help. You'd want to be there for them. Let someone be there for you.

## **That You Are Already Doing Enough**

Not the perfect version of enough. Not enough by some impossible standard. Enough given the reality you have: your energy, your resources, your limits. What you do every day — with the exhaustion you carry, with so little sleep, with thoughts that never stop — is already a tremendous amount. No one tells you this often. Maybe almost never. But it's true.

### **Thank you for reading this far.**

*I hope something in these pages has made you feel a little less alone.*

*That some tool might be useful tonight, or tomorrow morning,  
or the next time you're awake at 3 a.m. with your brain spinning.*

*You don't need to be different from who you are.*

*You just need — when you can — to find something that helps you hold on.*

*And you're already holding on. Every single day.*

# Appendix 1: Weekly Sleep Log

## Weekly Sleep Diary

Fill this in every morning. It only takes a minute. It doesn't need to be precise — just approximate.

|                    | MONDAY | TUESDAY | WEDNESDAY | THURSDAY | FRIDAY | SATURDAY | SUNDAY |
|--------------------|--------|---------|-----------|----------|--------|----------|--------|
| HOURS SLEPT        |        |         |           |          |        |          |        |
| NUMBER OF WAKE-UPS |        |         |           |          |        |          |        |
| WAKE TIME          |        |         |           |          |        |          |        |
| TOTAL HOURS        |        |         |           |          |        |          |        |
| QUALITY (1-5)      |        |         |           |          |        |          |        |
| NOTES ROWS         |        |         |           |          |        |          |        |

# Appendix 2: Brain Dump Worksheet

## Brain Dump Worksheet

Use this sheet before bed or when you're awake at night. You don't need to organize — just empty.

### WHAT'S IN MY HEAD RIGHT NOW

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### WHAT I CAN DO TOMORROW (not tonight)

1. 

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2. 

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3. 

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### WHAT IS NOT IN MY CONTROL (I can let this go)

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# Appendix 3: Evening Caregiver Checklist

## Evening Caregiver Checklist

Not a list of things to do — a list of things you've done. Check off what you managed.

### ESSENTIALS (done or scheduled)

Medications given correctly  
Meals / hydration managed  
Tomorrow's appointments confirmed  
Aide / support person notified if needed  
Medical emergencies: none pending

### FOR ME (even just one)

I ate something decent  
I drank enough water  
I had 10 minutes where I wasn't doing anything  
I talked with someone for my own sake  
I wrote my thoughts somewhere

### TOMORROW (not tonight)

The most important thing tomorrow is: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Something I can delegate: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Something I can postpone: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

# Appendix 4: Emergency Plan After a Sleepless Night

## Emergency Plan After a Sleepless Night

Read this the morning after a hard night. One step at a time.

### MORNING — BASIC SURVIVAL

- Drink something (coffee, tea, water — anything).
- Eat something within an hour of waking up.
- Do only the essentials for them: medications, meals, basic hygiene.
- Everything else: postpone.

### MID-MORNING — REASSESS

What's still urgent? \_\_\_\_\_

Who can I call for help? \_\_\_\_\_

What can I postpone until tomorrow? \_\_\_\_\_

### AFTERNOON — MICRO REST

If they're sleeping or calm: sit down. Even 15–20 minutes with your eyes closed. You don't have to sleep — just stop moving.

### EVENING — CLOSE EARLY

- Simple dinner (don't cook if you can avoid it).
- No difficult conversations.
- In bed 30–60 minutes earlier than usual.
- Brain dump sheet if your thoughts are racing.

# Appendix 5: “Do Tomorrow, Not Tonight” List

## “Do Tomorrow, Not Tonight” List

When you’re awake at night with your thoughts spinning, write everything you “need to do” here. Not to organize — just to free your mind.

### DO TOMORROW (not right now)

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_\_
7. \_\_\_\_\_
8. \_\_\_\_\_

Did you write everything down? Good. Now put the notebook down. Those things are safe there. You won’t lose them. You won’t forget them. You don’t need to hold them in your head tonight. Tonight, you don’t need to do anything except try to rest.

# Appendix 6: Things I Can Postpone

## Things I Can Postpone

Use this on days when everything feels equally urgent. It's not.

### I CAN POSTPONE 24 HOURS

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### I CAN POSTPONE ONE WEEK

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### I CAN DELEGATE TO SOMEONE

|             |            |
|-------------|------------|
| Task: _____ | Who: _____ |
| Task: _____ | Who: _____ |
| Task: _____ | Who: _____ |

### NOT URGENT — MAYBE NOT EVEN NECESSARY

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# Appendix 7: Weekly Energy Tracking Sheet

## Weekly Energy Tracking Sheet

Not to measure yourself — to observe yourself. To understand which days and moments drain you most, and which ones give you something back.

| DAY       | ☀️ MORNING ENERGY (1-5) | ☀️ AFTERNOON ENERGY (1-5) | 💚 WHAT HELPED ME | ⚡ WHAT DRAINED ME | 📝 ONE NOTE ROWS: |
|-----------|-------------------------|---------------------------|------------------|-------------------|------------------|
| MONDAY    |                         |                           |                  |                   |                  |
| TUESDAY   |                         |                           |                  |                   |                  |
| WEDNESDAY |                         |                           |                  |                   |                  |
| THURSDAY  |                         |                           |                  |                   |                  |
| FRIDAY    |                         |                           |                  |                   |                  |
| SATURDAY  |                         |                           |                  |                   |                  |
| SUNDAY    |                         |                           |                  |                   |                  |

At the end of the week, read it back. Not to judge yourself — to understand. Is there a time of day when you feel better? An activity that helps? A person who drains you? Every small piece of information you gather about yourself is one more tool for managing what lies ahead.

