



Caregiver Support Line Audio Recording - Transcript

Series: Care for the Caregiver

Topic: Vital Connections: Restoring Balance in the Most Challenging Times

Hello.

I am so pleased that you were able to set aside this time to listen to this presentation.

We all know how difficult it can be to take the time to focus on you and your own needs, so we hope this presentation will be a worthy use of your valuable time.

The topic for this presentation is, "Vital Connections: Restoring Balance in the Most Challenging Times."

I want to start by giving you a bit of an overview that describes how we will focus our time. We will start with looking at how we lose sight of ourselves and how we lose focus on what is happening inside us. I will discuss how losing our focus on ourselves results in losing touch with the vital connections that keep us resilient and strong.

We will use a brief meditation exercise to restore the focus and attention back on you.

We will then look at the many potential avenues we might explore to reconnect to the sources that restore us and consider the many avenues we might pursue on a daily basis to maintain our balance and strength.

So again, we will look at how we lose sight of ourselves, how we bring our attention back to ourselves, and then how we can reconnect every day in order to feel better.

Let's begin. How does it happen that we lose sight of ourselves? How do we maintain our sense of wellbeing, our balance, and our joy for living when we are confronted with life challenges?

Are you running from one demand to the next, racing to keep up with all the strains on your time and energy? Have you been emotionally drained from caring for others, caring for your home, keeping up with the bills, or trying to meet work expectations? Are you wondering, "How much longer can I keep this up? How can I keep going at this pace?"

You certainly are not alone. Caregivers in particular are at risk of being depleted by the demands of caregiving. Focusing attention on others, often at the exclusion of focusing



on yourself, really places you at higher risk of medical and emotional burnout and illness. Truly it's no wonder that you aren't caring for your own needs, when you are so focused on reacting to the demands coming at you and so focused on attending to others.

How do you begin to realistically care for yourself in this demanding, fast paced world that we find ourselves in? How do you make the time or find the energy to pay attention to yourself?

When you are in survival mode and focusing on every demand coming at you, when you are reacting, constantly reacting, to what is coming at you, you naturally lose sight of yourself. It is just an unintended consequence.

Restoring balance then requires shifting gears, stopping, getting back in the driver seat, and bringing your attention back to you.

Your participation in this group today is exactly what I am talking about. You made a decision to stop for a time. You made a decision to just think about yourself, look for relief, and change gears.

In our time together today, we will slow down, refocus our attention, and begin to explore all the many ways we can reconnect to the people, places, and activities that support our health, restore our energy, and bring some joy back into our day. We will look at some of the many, what I call, "vital connections," that we can turn to on a daily basis that will get us back on the road to feeling good.

Today, we will start with a brief exercise in doing just that. We will practice shifting gears, slowing down, stopping the merry-go-round, and focusing on ourselves. We will do this by slowing down and bringing our attention to our breath.

I am going to walk you through a brief refocusing meditation.

Just for a few moments, there are no expectations. Simply find a chair that supports you or you may wish to lie down.

If you are sitting, place your feet on the floor and your hands rested in your lap.

Breathe through your nose if you are able and gently place your tongue to the roof of your mouth. You may close your eyes if you wish. Let's begin by just taking a deep cleansing breath, in and out. Let your belly rise with your breath. Take another deep cleansing, restful breath.



Now, simply follow your breathing. There is nothing to do but pay attention to the natural rhythm of your own breath.

You don't have to do anything special, just observe the natural rhythm of your breathing.

If there are feelings that rise up, that's okay. Just observe them and let them pass.

Let the thoughts that float through your mind, your worries about your next chore, pass like a wave. Let them go, and return your attention to the healing calm in your breath. Let yourself just rest in the rise and fall of your breathing.

Simply settle into the quiet; following the natural rhythm. This quiet place is always here for you. You will find comfort here; simply bringing your attention back to your breath. You can return and find solace whenever you wish.

When you are ready, you may slowly bring your attention back to your surroundings. Open your eyes and recognize the benefits of slowing down.

Now that you have gotten the feel for slowing down and getting out of reaction and survival mode, your attention has been returned to your own center, and with this you are bringing your whole self to the present moment.

It is the ability to be in our own center in the present moment that is critical to restoring ourselves and our connections. From this centered place, now we will begin to look at the avenues we might explore to reconnect to ourselves and to what matters to us.

What I have found in my experience as a therapist is that those who have lost hope or have become so despairing that they no longer have a desire for life almost always report a noticeable loss of connection, or many losses of connection.

It appears that the more people become disconnected from themselves, from their feelings, from others and from what matters, the more they are prone to despair. What keeps us resilient and engaged in living are the connections that we maintain.

When the military speaks of resilience, they are talking about the important connections that help people cope and function at their optimum. What are these connections that keep us resilient?

I will begin to review some of the major categories one might turn to if one were looking to restore the connections that act as a source of our strength that feed our desire for living.



First of all, we need to be connected to ourselves. “What does that mean?” you might be asking. Well, it really does mean paying attention to ourselves, just as we did in our meditation. You may be asking or wondering, “How could I not be connected to myself?”

Well, as I mentioned earlier, if we look at this issue of being in "survival mode," the life coming at you fast mode, reacting to a lot of external demands, a traumatic event or a threat, the fight or flight mode of operating kicks in. We instinctively resort to fight or flight as human beings when we are responding to a crisis.

When we are in survival mode, we are not noticing how we feel. We shut off our feelings in this mode so that we can cope with the crisis. When we are operating in crisis mode we are simply responding and reacting to the crisis. We are not reflecting on how we feel.

Now, certainly when people are reacting in crisis mode, it may be helpful at the time to not actually notice how you are feeling. When in crisis, what you need to do is gather all your energy and attention together in order to protect yourself. It is helpful to have this biological mechanism in place in order to protect ourselves in a crisis, but if it has become our normal way of operating, it can contribute to being disconnected from our feelings.

Sometimes people have had so many challenges in life that it can become a habit to stay in that crisis mode. Others, such as military personnel or first responders, may be trained to shut off their feelings in order to function in the face of real threats. It is a powerful, protective biological response to simply react when we are managing external threats or demands.

In this survival mode, our adrenaline is engaged as well as other physical responses to react to the threat. This heightened physical reaction can take a physical toll on the body over time. Crisis survival mode is a very stressful mode of operating.

Along with the stress on our physical system when we are in crisis mode, there is emotional fallout as well. If we are always shutting off our feelings in order to react to crisis, not only do these feelings get stored away like unreleased energy piling up, but we also lose access to a very powerful source of information and experience.

If we shut off our feelings, we also dampen our sense of joy or meaning and limit our connections to others. If we are chronically cut off from our feelings, we may also miss some of the important feedback that our feelings were meant to provide us.



Our feelings are there for a reason. We need them! If we are not paying attention to feeling angry, scared, tired, or burdened, we may not be protecting ourselves very well. Connecting to your feelings is critical. I am not talking about sitting around intensely preoccupied with your feelings, nor is it necessary to hold on to them too tightly or put a big spotlight on them but having them, noticing them, and paying attention to them is really important.

Our feelings are protective. They tell us who matters and they can also alert us to what matters. For instance, if someone steps on your toes, you get angry. Your feeling is telling you something important. If you're paying attention, then you can use that information to firmly ask the person to get off your toes. If you recognize your feelings, they will instruct you or provide you critical feedback about actions or direction you may need to take.

Our feelings can also send us vital information about who and what matters to us. If you always have your feelings tucked away, you may not only cut off some of the painful feelings but also the loving, joyful or passionate feelings as well. Life will feel flat or numb.

It is a common myth that admitting to your feelings is a sign of weakness. In actuality, it takes real strength to recognize, fully experience, and accept your feelings. Denying and resisting your feelings is the most likely means of weakening your resilience and your strength.

So again, we connect to ourselves when we connect to our feelings. Notice them, express them in a safe manner, and use them to inform yourself about how to proceed. Some may fear that if they let themselves actually feel, it will be overwhelming or too painful. Interestingly, it is often our resistance to feeling that causes such persistent suffering. Just think of a time you tried to resist feeling sad, and tried to resist that heavy ache. Maybe you just stopped resisting and had a good old cry. Think of how much better you felt when you just let it out. It was the resistance, the trying to make it go away, that felt so crummy.

Again, it is important to remember, that when we cut ourselves off from the painful feelings, we are also cutting ourselves off from the more joyful feelings. When we cut ourselves off from our feelings, we cut off our connection to others as well as diminish our desire for living.

So, in what ways can we begin to let our feelings be noticed and released in a way that is helpful? First, simply notice them. Notice and name the feeling. Then take notice of your resistance or your efforts to try to make it go away. Sit with it for a moment without pushing it away, without holding it tightly, or amplifying it. Practice simply recognizing



the feeling. Let yourself breathe into it. Don't resist it and you will find that it will pass naturally. With practice, you will notice that your ability to manage your emotions will improve and with proper attention to them, you will find that it will bring greater depth and satisfaction to your daily living.

Next, let's look to our body as a vital source of connection. Our physical connections can get ignored, underutilized, and underappreciated as a source of wellbeing. How might we look to our body, our physical experience, as a source of resilience and pleasure? How might we also begin to think about caring for our bodies to build our resilience?

One way to reconnect to our body is with movement. The simple act of movement can brighten our spirits, change or shift our perspective, and even stimulate our brains to function more optimally. There are many profound examples of the power of movement transforming emotion, enhancing personal competence, and creating a positive sense of self. Just notice how taking a walk, paying attention to your breathing, dancing or stretching, affects you. Notice how the act of engaging our bodies in movement can help you manage your mood or enhance your confidence and self-esteem. You don't have to run a marathon to get the benefits of movement each day.

So how might you commit to putting a bit of movement into the day? Even putting a couple of minutes of attention each day can make a difference. You may find there is a similar resistance with movement as there is with focusing on your feelings. There may be that little voice in your head saying, "Oh don't bother," but I bet if you encourage yourself to push through that initial feeling, the initial resistance, the benefits will be obvious. A little bit can go a long way.

Next, we might look to our senses as a source of connection. All of our physical senses such as sight, sound, taste, touch, and smell are a blessing and a source of connection.

Let's take our sense of hearing for instance. Maybe listening to music or paying attention to the sounds in nature may bring healing. Maybe it is enjoying the silence, or really listening to another. What sounds help you feel connected? What sounds soothe you?

Our sense of sight is a vital connection. There is healing in recognizing and paying attention to the beauty around us. Take the time to notice, to recognize and to see the beauty in color, in light, in nature, the seasons, the landscapes around you, or in the faces of your loved ones. Is there enjoyment or a vitality appreciating color? What colors do you prefer? Maybe putting on your favorite color will be a boost. Is there a favorite picture book that you enjoy looking through? Taking a few moments each day



to notice this beauty can really help you feel more connected and happy. It doesn't take waiting for a vacation. It just takes your attention!

Next, how about your sense of taste? How often do you rush through eating, barely noticing the taste? Let yourself take the time to truly appreciate your sense of taste, noticing what you want to eat, and noticing when you are satisfied. Set your table. Make a ritual of really appreciating the taste of your meal. When we are rushing through our day, it is easy to just rush through our meals not paying any attention at all to what we are doing. We oftentimes run the risk of piling in the food for comfort, not noticing how it tastes. If we slow down, we may really be much more able to enjoy the taste as well as pay closer attention to when we have had enough. When we slow down, we will be more connected to our body and what it needs. We will really savor the gift of our sense of taste.

How about our sense of touch? We often don't realize how vital our need is for physical touch. Our sense of touch provides pleasure, a means of comfort and soothing, and an avenue for connection to ourselves and to others. Without the comfort of touch, a baby will not thrive. That is how critical our need is for touch. Pay attention and shake hands, hug, hold, kiss, and share and receive affection. Nurture your need for soothing physical touch by putting on your favorite cozy clothes, taking a long bath, or being affectionate with your loved ones. Consider how you might nurture your need for physical touch.

Our sense of smell can help us feel connected. Maybe a walk through your garden or running your fingers through some herbs will enhance feelings of being connected. Putting on your favorite scent may bring a needed boost. Smell can re-awaken memories and connect us to the past, like the smell of home cooking at grandma's house. The scent of the changing seasons may bring our attention to the richness of our land and the passing of time.

There are so many ways we can restore ourselves physically with movement, or inviting and appreciating all our physical senses. We can look to all these physical connections to bring the life back into our day.

Now, let's consider the connection of engaging ourselves mentally or creatively. We hear about the importance of keeping our minds active, continuing to learn, continuing to create and be challenged. If we look at those people whose lives seem really vital, those who remain energized and engaged in living despite their age, the ones who seem to stay young at heart, the common thread may be they are curious, creative, and continue to learn.



Take a risk. Learn or study something new. Read something new, learn a new word, or create something that will engage your interests, your curiosity, and your creativity. It is never too late to learn something you always wanted to learn, or to challenge yourself mentally or creatively. Stimulating and challenging your creativity or your mind will stimulate your interest in living.

Social supports are a powerful and important source of nurturance, support and connection. How many times has your burden been lifted by sharing it with another? How often has your mood been made lighter by the gift of connecting with another? We can make and benefit from these connections in even the most limited way. Small acts of connection can make a big difference. It doesn't have to mean spending all day with someone, or being in groups of people. You can make social connections in all kinds of ways. Try greeting someone as you pass, writing a letter, making a phone call, sitting in a coffee shop and looking at others, sharing a friendly word, or recognizing eye contact.

Consider making a list of contacts that you may turn to that remind you of where you might turn for connection. Sometimes we forget, when under stress, those who are there for us. Keep the list handy, adding to the list, whether its friends, family, church, workmates or community connections. Be creative. Reach out; it can make all the difference in your daily life.

Nature is another powerful resource to restore our desire for living. Appreciating nature can return its blessing back to us by simply giving it recognition. Whether it is the simple act of putting bare feet on cool evening grass, taking a swim in a lake, a hike in the woods, watching birds at the feeder, or sitting in a garden, we can awaken our appreciation for our connection to the natural world with the simple act of engaging it with our full attention. Connecting to nature has the power to restore us and it doesn't cost a dime. How might you engage with the natural world?

Finally, how might we revive our sense of meaning, our values and beliefs, our spirit, and sense of purpose in order to feel more connected? For some of us, we may have spiritual practices that help, such as prayer or attending a service. Sometimes we need to be reminded of what matters to us and how we matter to others. Maybe it's remembering and recognizing how we contribute to our family, our friends, our community, or our work. Maybe we have a special skill or gift that needs to be appreciated or shared. We may find meaning in our rituals, our celebrations, and in our memories. We can honor how we hold ourselves up in the face of life's difficulties and the potential we always have to add to the world, however limited we may be by life circumstances.



Ask yourself, “What might I do to remember, to honor, and to practice my values and beliefs?” There are so many opportunities to provide comfort and nurturing as well as bring the vitality back into our daily life. All we have to do is decide to put energy into making a connection. It requires only attention, a decision, and an action.

We can find ways each day, small ways, small steps, to restore ourselves without spending a lot of money and without needing a lot of time. We can create a toolbox full of helpful resources for us to turn to on a daily basis that can truly buoy us up during the tough times, and that can awaken and maintain the joy in our daily lives.

I encourage you to do as you did today. You took the time to pay attention to yourself. I hope and believe that you can. . You deserve to give this continued commitment to yourself. I hope that you consider bringing your attention back each day, many times a day, to the vital connections that are at your fingertips. Again, look to connecting with your feelings, movement, and your sense of sight, sound, taste, touch, and smell to connect with others, connect with nature, connect with your creativity and challenge your mind. Remember your value and meaning. Notice these connections. Enjoy them, and see how it helps build your resilience even in the most challenging times!

I hope you found this presentation a worthy use of your time. Thank you for listening. If you are a Caregiver of a Veteran and would like to discuss any of the ideas offered during this presentation, I invite you to contact your local Caregiver Support Coordinator.

You may also contact a social worker at the Caregiver Support Line at 1-855-260-3274. Thank you for all you do.