

Stepping back: Don't Take it Personally

Our topic for today is "Stepping Back: Don't Take it Personally". As a caregiver, have you ever thought to yourself, "If I had only _____" ...fill in the blank. "If I had only not left them alone, they wouldn't have fallen". "If only I hadn't wanted to go to the movies they wouldn't have had a panic attack". The focus of this presentation will be to talk about what personalization or "taking it personally" is. We will talk about why this is common among caregivers, what the negative impacts are, and finally, things you can do to stop these harmful thoughts in order to improve your mood and actions as caregivers.

Let's begin.

When caring for your loved one, do you find that you blame yourself for their medical condition? Do you find yourself thinking that you are not doing enough, or you are not doing a good job caring for your loved one when something goes wrong? When your loved one makes hurtful statements to you or is irritable or depressed, do you find yourself thinking you are doing something wrong and it's your fault? It is very common for caregivers to blame themselves for their loved one's condition or behavior, even when they are not the cause. This is called personalization, and it is a common thought trap or thought distortion. Cognitive distortions are automatic, biased, irrational, inaccurate thoughts.

Under extreme stress, we're more vulnerable to changes and kinks in our thinking that can undermine our well-being. These negative thoughts are normal and common, and we all have them. They are not our fault. They can sneak up on us, and at times, we don't even notice them.

Personalization or "taking it personally" is one of the most common errors in thinking or thought distortion, and it is when you believe you are responsible for an event that you have little or no control of. In other words, you take something that happens that is not your fault and take it personally.

Personalization can take many forms. For example, your loved one might have to go to the hospital after a fall. You may think, "If only I had kept a better eye on them, they would not have fallen". Or your loved one might be upset when you offer help, and lash out, yelling "I can do it myself!" You may think, "I must have offered help the wrong way", or "I could have put that another way so my loved one didn't get so upset". These thoughts can affect our mood, behavior, and our ability to best care for others and ourselves.

We are now going to focus on why caregivers are so prone to taking things personally. Personalization and thought distortions in general, are common when someone is under stress or is in a difficult situation. Caregiving is the most difficult job there is, and you as caregivers, are often under a lot of stress. Let's talk about some of the things that cause stress to caregivers.

The factors that cause stress in caregivers are many. Many caregivers experience isolation. Due to the demands of caregiving and their loved one not being able to leave the house easily, they may not be able to get out and socialize with others.

You may experience financial hardship, due to not being able to work or work as much. Maybe you have mounting medical bills. This may cause stress and worry about how you are going to afford your bills or for your basic needs.

The change in roles that often happens while caring for a loved one can also take a toll and cause stress. You may be a caregiver for your spouse, where you were used to dividing tasks and having an intimate relationship, and now find you are focused on their care and completing the household tasks your loved one used to do. You may be caring for your parent, who you used to look to for support and guidance and knew as the caretaker, and now you are caring for them.

As a caregiver, you may feel on constant duty due to the many needs of your loved one and the many tasks required. You may feel you always have to be available or “on call”. You may also have little time alone to decompress due to caregiving, which increases stress. You may also experience burn out due to having to do so much, being isolated, and not having time for yourself. You may feel guilty about feeling this way and feel this is somehow being disloyal to your loved one. These are normal experiences and feelings to have.

Veterans can experience a variety of complex medical and mental health diagnoses. Caring for loved ones with certain diagnoses can make personalization more likely. For example, when a loved one has dementia, they are not able to process certain events or actions as you or I and they are more likely to lash out verbally or physically. People with Traumatic Brain Injury may become irrational and have difficulty regulating their emotions. Individuals with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder may display irritability and outbursts, and/or withdraw and not want to be around others. Due to these symptoms, caregivers of individuals with these diagnoses may be more prone to personalization. For example, if someone with dementia starts yelling or calling you names, it’s very difficult to not take it personally! Or if your loved one is isolating themselves due to PTSD, you may think that this is because they don’t care anymore, when it may really be due to the anxiety related to their condition.

We are now going to talk about how personalizing can have a negative impact on caregivers. Studies have shown as caregivers you are more prone to anxiety and depression. Our thoughts, feelings, and behavior are all linked together, and when we take things personally, it can increase our anxiety and depression and negatively affect how we think of ourselves. Conversely, anxiety and depression can cause personalization and other negative thoughts.

There are many negative ways anxiety and depression can take a toll on us, including our physical health. Anxiety and depression can lead to a weakened immune system, headaches, stomachaches, digestive issues, fatigue, muscle tension or pain, and many

other medical or physical problems. Depression and anxiety can also lead to sleep problems or losing or gaining weight.

Personalization and a negative mood can lead to behaviors that are harmful to you, such as not caring for yourself by smoking, drinking too much, or drug use. It can also lead to not going to doctor's appointments, or maybe not getting the exercise we need or eating right. This can lead to further negative impacts on your health.

Personalizing thoughts can also affect our relationships. If you take something that your loved one does personally, this can lead to more irritability with them, cause you to isolate from them, and create poor communication and interactions. This can greatly affect the care you are able to provide your loved one, and the care they accept from you.

Negative thoughts and mood can also affect our relationships with other loved ones. You may find yourself isolating from others. You may find yourself not calling that friend or family member or accepting invitations to socialize. You may stop going to that church or other community organization, or stop reaching out for the vital help that you need. This can lead to a situation where your thoughts and mood decline even further.

The good news is this - you have the power to stop personalizing! When we can change these negative thought patterns, we can improve our mood, and lead to more positive behavior towards ourselves and others.

Now let's talk about what you can do to stop personalizing.

Once you become familiar with the personalization thought trap, you can recognize these harmful thoughts and they will occur less over time. This will give you the power to change your thoughts to more positive ones, no matter what you are going through in your caregiving role.

One tool in your "not taking it personally" toolbox is specific support through individual therapy. There are certain therapies that have been shown by research to stop negative thinking and improve mood. One evidenced based therapy that is used is called cognitive behavior therapy. This is a type of therapy or treatment that helps people learn how to identify and change destructive or harmful thought patterns that have a negative influence on their behavior and emotions. Many therapists are trained in this type of treatment. Individual counseling with a therapist trained in this type of therapy can be crucial to helping you to stop personalization.

We now want to talk about specific, realistic, strategies that can help reduce personalizing. One strategy that comes from cognitive behavioral therapy, which can help you to stop taking things personally is a thought record. I am going to explain the five steps for developing a thought record.

Number one - Write down the situation. For example, "My loved one fell".

Number two - Write down the thoughts you had. For example, "If I was watching more carefully, my loved one wouldn't have fallen".

Number three - Write down the emotions you felt. For example, "I felt depressed or guilty about them falling."

Number four - Write down your behaviors. For example, "I couldn't bring myself to call my friend even though we were supposed to talk today."

Number five – Write down an alternate positive thought. For example: "I was doing my best, I can't prevent all bad things from happening".

Let's get some practice with this to get used to this skill. Take a moment to find pen and paper or pull up a notepad on your tablet or cell phone. [Pause]

Think about a situation that was difficult. [Pause] For example, my partner was triggered, and we had to leave our date night at the restaurant, or my loved one yelled at me when I was trying to help. [Pause]

Let's go through these five steps now.

Number one - Write down the situation or event that occurred. [Pause]

Number two - Write down the thoughts you had. [Pause]

Number three - Write down the emotions you felt. [Pause]

Number four - Write down what you did. [Pause]

Number five – Write down an alternate positive thought you could have had about the situation. [Pause]

You can see how taking these steps and reframing how you think about a situation, can have a more positive impact on how you see yourself as a caregiver.

OK, now that we have practiced that strategy, another way to stop personalizing thoughts, is to challenge these thoughts. There are a couple of ways to do this. One is called compassionate cognitive restructuring. This is simply looking at the negative thought, through a caring lens. You can do this by thinking about what you would say to a loved one in a similar situation, or what a loved one would say to you, to assist thinking in a more caring and compassionate way towards yourself. Would you have such negative and harmful thoughts about a loved one in a similar situation? Most likely not! Work towards being as compassionate to yourself as you would be to others.

Another way to challenge your thinking is to put your personalizing thought “on trial”. This is where you use a metaphor of a court room where you put your negative thought “on trial”. You take your negative thought and look at the “defense” of the thought and list reasons the thought might be true. Next, act as the prosecutor where you argue that your personalizing thought is false, and list all of the reasons against the thought. This can help you realize there is no evidence that your negative thought is true, to help not take a particular event personally. Let’s use your example from before. Circle number two from our activity. Next, draw a line down the middle of the page. On the right side, write down the reasons your thought may be true. For example, “I am a caregiver, it is my job to look after my loved one.” On the left side, write down the reasons that thought is false. “Accidents or setbacks can happen. I am proud that I was there to help them through the hard time.”

A third tool for your “not taking it personally” toolbox is to change what you are doing to “interrupt” the negative thought. Call a friend, take a walk, do some deep breathing, listen to music that calms you or makes you feel good, do an activity you enjoy, like crafts or gardening. Doing activities that are positive and that you enjoy can help you shift away from taking an event personally. This can also improve your mood, which can also stop these negative thoughts.

Another tool to not take things personally is to bring to mind your loved one that you feel responsible for and then fill in the blank:

I’m responsible for /their _____. Possible things to fill in the blank are: Happiness, health or well-being, behavior towards me/others, or ability to cope.

Ask yourself is this realistic? It is not. You are not responsible for your loved one’s actions, health, or mental wellbeing. There are a lot of factors involved, including your loved one’s history, their diagnosis, and their ability to manage their emotions. Say to yourself, “I do my best to care for my loved one. Sometimes they might be happy, sometimes they might not be. Sometimes they will be healthy, but sometimes they might get sick or get hurt, despite everything I do for them. It’s that way for me, my loved one, and everyone else.”

Another important tool against taking things personally is mindfulness. Mindfulness is grounding yourself in moment-by-moment awareness of your thoughts, feelings, physical body, and surrounding environment, through a gentle, nurturing view. One example is a Guided Meditation for Positive Energy, by Clare Hudson. We are going to take some time and practice this together. Please only do what feels comfortable for you.

Please start by coming into a comfortable seated position where you won’t be disturbed.

I’m going to now invite you to close your eyes if it feels good to do so.

Take this moment to feel your whole body in the space it's in from the top of your head, all the way down your spine, to the soles of your feet.

Please now take a deep breath in through the nose if you're able. Hold the breath. And exhale fully out through your mouth.

Take another deep breath in. Hold the breath. And exhale fully. Mentally letting go of anything that is no longer serving you.

Last one. Inhale. Hold the breath. And exhale completely.

Allow your breathing to return to its natural rhythm and just start to observe the natural rise and fall of the body as you inhale and exhale.

You might like to now take both hands to the space at the center of your chest where your heart is located and repeat the mantra after me. I am enough.

Whatever is going on in your life right now, wherever you're at, take this moment to just be with whatever thoughts feelings and sensations arise without judgement.

Please repeat the mantra I am enough.

Now take your awareness to the top of your head and then extend that awareness up above you and start to visualize a light or energy source above your head. This might be a golden or white light, or even a liquid light coming down from above and into your head.

Visualize this light coming into your head, your neck and shoulders. Allow the light to come down into both arms, hands, and your whole torso. Feel the light coming down to your hips, flowing down your legs and into your feet.

Become aware of your whole body as a source of light and start to awaken the sensation of lightness throughout your whole body.

Repeat the mantra I am enough.

Now connecting to all the parts of your body touching the ground beneath you — visualize roots connecting and grounding you to the earth. Send your awareness all the way down through the center of the earth now and start to visualize another light source.

Allow this light from the center of the earth to flow all the way up into the soles of your feet, your legs and your hips. Allow this grounding light to flow into your torso, your hands and arms. Let this light now flow into your shoulders, your neck and your whole head.

Feel your whole body as a source of radiant glowing light. And now extend this light around you to form a protective aura surrounding your whole body like a cocoon of protective glowing light.

Repeat the mantra, I am enough.

If there's anything right now that's not serving you, visualize whatever it is leaving your body as grey smoke. Allow the protective aura of light surrounding you, to transform this grey energy back into brilliant glowing light.

See everything as being in a constant state of flow and change.

Now allow yourself to sit in your cocoon of light without judging yourself. Allow yourself to be with whatever arises.

Repeat the mantra I am enough.

Become aware again of the natural rise and fall of your body as you inhale and exhale.

Feel your whole physical body in the space it's in from the top of your head to the soles of your feet.

If you're ever feeling depleted of energy in the future or you're sensing negative energy from others, visualize this glowing aura or cocoon of light surrounding and protecting you.

Gently start to bring subtle movement back into your body, and when you're ready, open your eyes.

Doing mindful exercises like the one we just practiced, can help you stop, and look at your thoughts objectively and compassionately. The more you practice mindfulness the more effective it is.

Self-care and taking time for yourself can also assist you in avoiding personalizing and negative thinking in general. We know that this is easier said than done! Take that bath. Listen to that music that relaxes you. Drink that cup of tea. Reach out to someone that you enjoy talking to. Meditate or do that craft you enjoy. Take a moment to take a deep breath.

Finally, reaching out for support and assistance can also be an important tool in your not taking things personally toolbox. This can reduce your stress and improve your mood, leading to more positive thinking. Your local Caregiver Support Program team at your loved one's VA can possibly assist in finding respite if you need a break. Call your neighbor, friend, or person in the community you think might lend a hand. And of course, you can always reach out to us at the Caregiver Support Line. Self-care and seeking out help can greatly assist avoiding personalizing and improve your mood and actions.

Today, we have talked about what personalization or "taking it personally" is, it's effect on us, why caregivers are prone to this thinking, and strategies to assist thinking more positively in order to help our mood and our abilities to be caregivers. You deserve to be kind to yourself by stopping this harmful way of thinking called personalization! We hope

that the strategies we discussed will help you stop this harmful thinking and improve your wellbeing. Thank you for taking this journey with us today.