

The Caregiver's Companion
to Recharging:

Finding ways to
relax and recharge



“My primary ways to relax and recharge were writing and being with my daughters. One allowed me to relax and process. The other made me smile, made me laugh, and reminded me that, despite the circumstances, I was lucky after all.” — **Brian, caregiver**

Finding ways to **relax**

Your body reacts to stress as if you were trying to escape from danger. Your pulse quickens, your blood pressure goes up, and your muscles become tense.

In the short-term, stress is not harmful. But caregiving can bring on long-term stress, which causes wear and tear on your body, your mood, your productivity, and your quality of life.

It's no wonder that an overheated pressure cooker is often used to illustrate unrelenting stress.

If being a caregiver makes you feel like you're a pressure cooker ready to burst, use the relaxation exercises in this chapter to turn down the heat and release the pressure building up inside of you.

Many of these exercises don't take long. So you don't need to carve out hours a day. Just spending a few minutes here and there throughout your day can help you feel relaxed and recharged.



Susan, caregiver

The purpose of the *Caregivers Companion: Relax and Recharge* is to help you learn easy relaxation techniques to help you reduce your stress and recharge. In this chapter:

Examine your stress

- Understand what triggers your stress
- Write it down

Now work in relaxation—simply

- Ten easy ways to recharge now
- Let music take you away
- Let the pictures in your mind distract you
- Breathe your way to a peaceful state
- Carve out some “me” time

Relaxation resources

- Books, CDs, DVDs, and online help

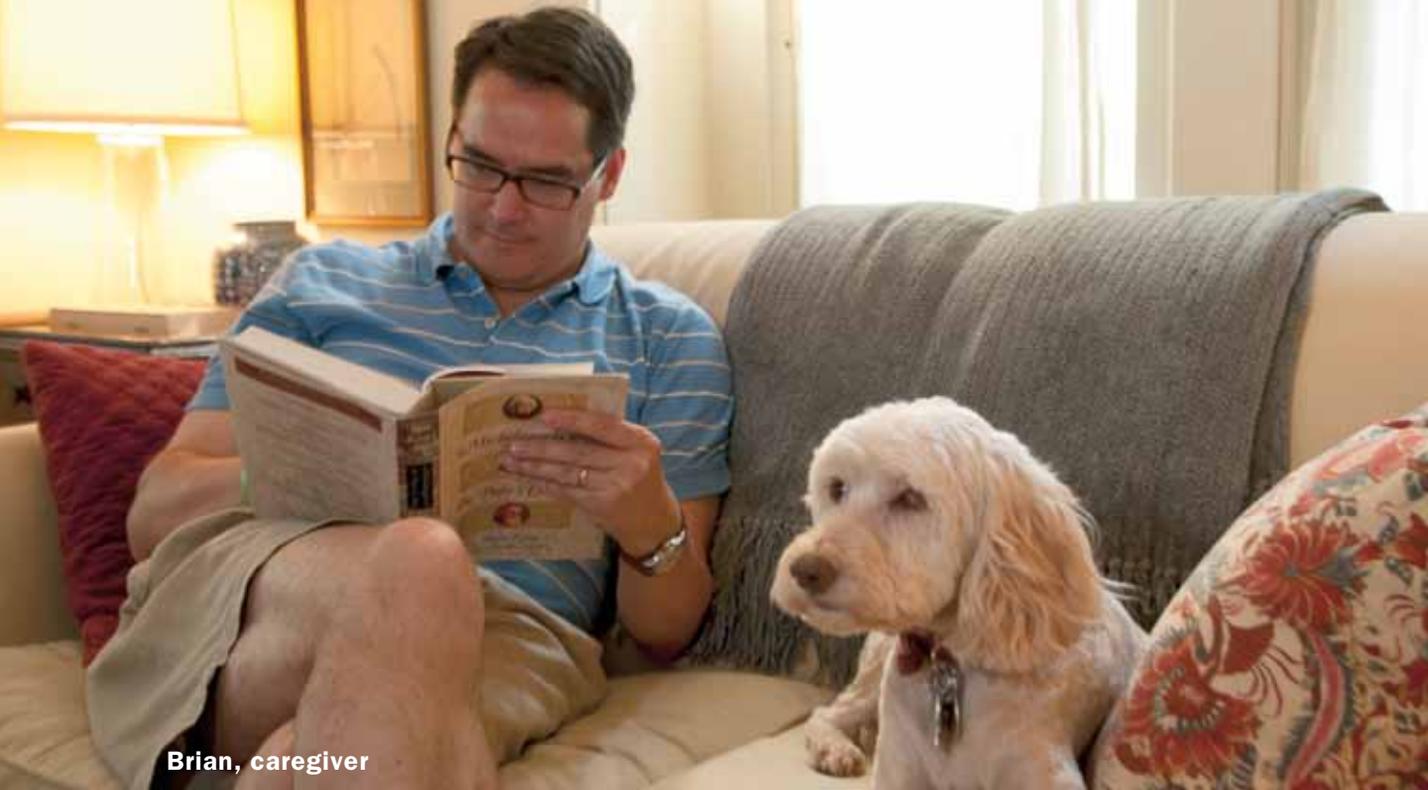
This chapter focuses on relaxation techniques as a way to “turn off” stress. But you can also “burn off” stress by increasing your physical movement. Please see the Physical Health chapter to learn about how to become healthier and more stress-free by incorporating more physical exercise into your day.

How are you doing **right now**?

Before you read on, take a minute to answer a few questions about your current skills in relaxing.

- Do you know what things trigger your stress?.....* Yes No
- Are you able to find time to rest and relax each day?.....* Yes No
- Can you easily let go of any negative emotions?.....* Yes No
- When stress builds up, are you able to quickly recharge?* Yes No
- When you try to let go of stress, does it work?* Yes No
- Are you able to do at least one thing you enjoy every day?* Yes No

If you've checked "No" more times than "Yes," you're not alone. But that also means it's time to add some relaxation exercises into your day to reduce your level of stress.



Brian, caregiver

Figuring out what brings on your stress

Write it down

Use the journal to identify which stress-reduction tools you currently use are working for you, and which are not. This way, you'll be able to pinpoint when and where you can start applying relaxation techniques.



Each of us may have different triggers that lead to stress, and our own way of calming down. By recognizing some common signs of stress, such as feeling tired or having trouble concentrating, you can more effectively use the relaxation exercises in this chapter.

A great way to become aware of the things that stress you out is to write them down. Each time you feel stressed, make a note of it in your journal. Write down:

- What caused your stress (make a guess if you're unsure)
- Explore where you carry your stress (Your back? Your neck?)
- How did you feel, both physically and emotionally?
- How did you respond?
- What did you do that helped you feel better?

(From HelpGuide.org)

Working in **relaxation**—simply

In order to make sure that you relax or take a break each day, you may need to actually schedule it. Make it a priority. Set aside 10-20 minutes a day as **YOUR** time.

When you are relaxed:

- You are slowing your heart rate
- You are lowering your blood pressure
- You are improving your concentration
- You are reducing discomfort

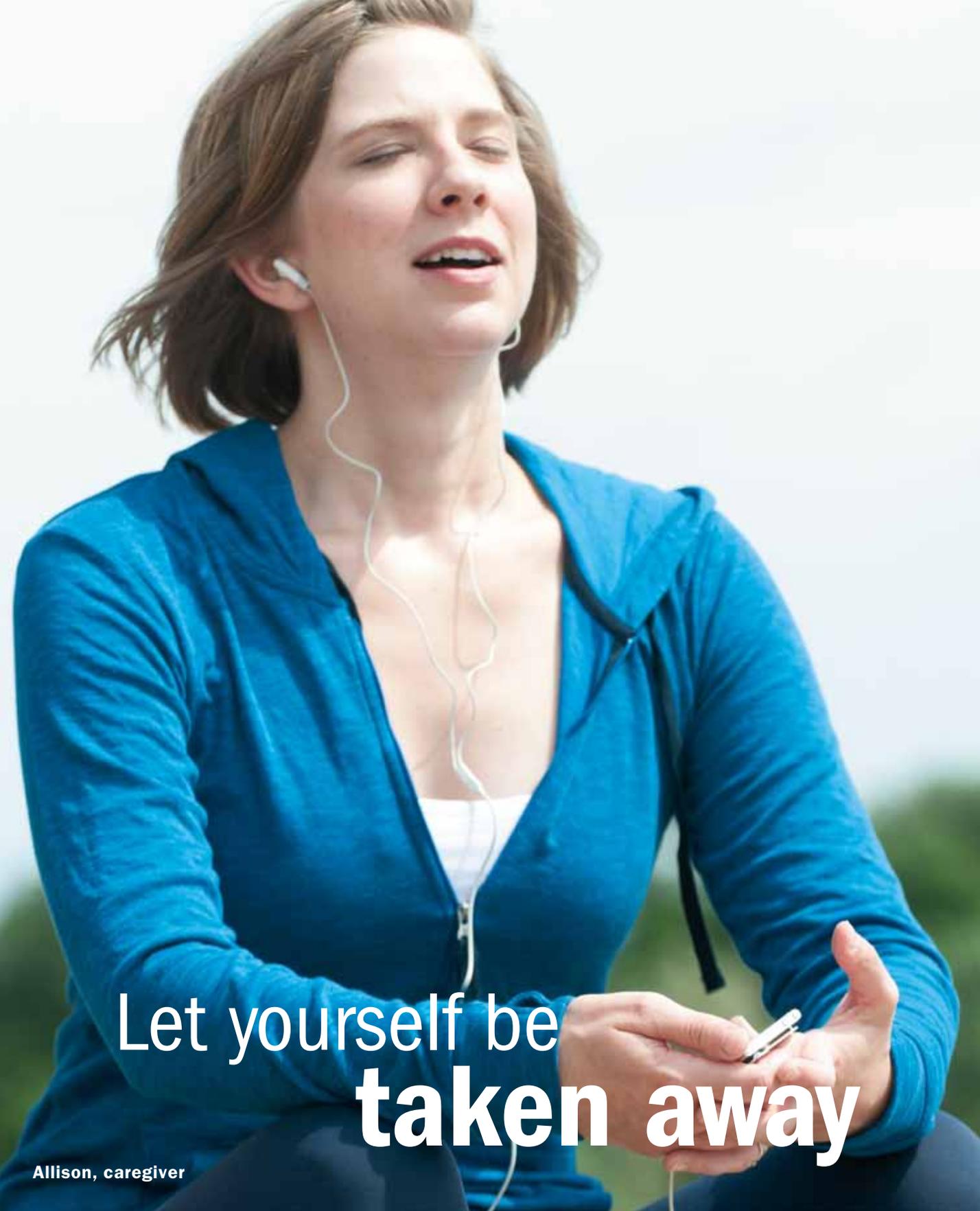
So let's get started on learning some relaxation techniques to lower your stress. And remember, relaxation strategies are skills – the more you practice, the more it will help.

10 easy ways to **recharge NOW**

To get you going down the road to relaxation right away, take a look at these ideas that can be easily added to your daily routine:

- 1 Take 5-10 minutes every morning** and/or every evening to be quiet, breathe, meditate, or pray—sit or lie down—stretch, gaze out the window, do five minute meditation, listen to the sounds of nature, go outside and breathe the fresh air.
- 2 While you are driving**, at every stoplight and stop sign, take your hands off the wheel for one moment and put them in your lap. Take one deep breath in and out and then be on your way.
- 3 Take breaks** to truly stop and relax, rather than only “pausing.” For instance, instead of having coffee, a cigarette, or reading, try taking a short walk, or sit outside quietly taking some deep breaths to renew yourself.
- 4 Change your environment.** Get up and walk down the hall or go outside.
- 5 Take five extra minutes** in the shower to enjoy the warmth and water.
- 6 Hold and pet your cat** for a few minutes or romp outside with your dog.
- 7 Spend a few moments playing** with your child or grandchild, or read them a book.
- 8 Watch a few funny videos** to get your funny bone working again. Rent a funny movie.
- 9 Escape into a chapter** of a good book or a magazine (even if just for 15 minutes).
- 10 Turn up your favorite song** and sing loudly in the car on the way to the grocery store.

At the end of the day, retrace the day and acknowledge yourself for what you've accomplished. Then make a list for tomorrow. You've done enough for today.

A young woman with brown hair, wearing a bright blue zip-up hoodie over a white top, is shown from the chest up. She has white earbuds in her ears and is looking upwards with a joyful expression, her mouth slightly open as if singing or listening to music. Her hands are clasped in front of her, holding a small white device, likely a smartphone or MP3 player. The background is a bright, out-of-focus outdoor setting, possibly a park or a field, with a clear sky.

Let yourself be
taken away

Allison, caregiver

Let **music** take you away

Listening to your favorite music is relaxing and easy to work into your schedule. Listen to and enjoy your music in whatever way feels best:

- As you do the gentle stretching exercises described in the *Physical Health* chapter
- As you lie down to sleep, letting the sounds relax you, allowing your thoughts to float away for the night, so that you can be fresh the next day to pick them up again
- As you write in your journal
- While doing deep breathing (see page 8) to maximize your relaxation
- As you tap your toe or dance your way to burn off stress and become recharged

Let the **pictures** in your mind take you away

Imagery is using your mind's eye, or your imagination, to form a mental picture in your mind of something that helps you feel positive or relaxed. It distracts by redirecting your attention on something else.

Here are some examples of mental images you can form:

- A favorite place, perhaps somewhere you like to go with your family, alone, or on vacation. What sounds do you hear? What do you smell in the air?
- Something simple and soothing, like sitting next to a serene lake. See the sunlight (or moonlight) reflecting off the water. Hear the birds singing. Smell the pine trees.
- A tropical beach. Feel a cool breeze on your body. Hear the lapping waves. Smell the tropical flowers, taste the tropical fruit.

If you have trouble coming up with your own images or have trouble keeping an image in your mind's eye, you might prefer guided imagery, which uses a narrator.

If you are interested in trying a guided imagery exercise, visit BeTheMatch.org/companion to explore resources that can help.

Let yourself be guided into **relaxation**

Do you prefer to be guided through relaxation exercises? Then try the exercises below. Each one is designed to teach you the basic skills of stress awareness and relaxation. Most are less than 10 minutes long, and several are less than five minutes.

You can link to these exercises from BeTheMatch.org/companion

- Deep Breathing: Breathe deeply and relax your mind and body.
- Progressive Relaxation: Relax your tense muscles.
- Sonic Meditation: Let sound help you achieve relaxation.
- Scanning: Find, and then relax places in your body where you hold tension.
- Deep Relaxation: Relax all the way to your toes.

Visit BeTheMatch.org/companion for a list of other relaxation resources that can help you.

Breathe your way to a peaceful state

For a simple, yet powerful relaxation technique, try deep abdominal breathing. It can be done almost anywhere, and it quickly gives you the energy and oxygen you need to naturally reduce stress and body tension.

Try this simple deep breathing exercise for 5 to 10 minutes, twice a day:

- 1 Sit or stand with good posture
- 2 Breathe in through your nose
- 3 First, fill the lower stomach area (abdominal) part of your lungs
- 4 Then, expand your middle or chest area
- 5 And finally, fill the upper part, so that your lungs are completely full
- 6 Hold your breath for a few seconds
- 7 Exhale slowly, and visualize pushing out stressful thoughts or worries
- 8 Repeat



Stacey, caregiver

With each deep breath, you can also use positive self-talk by saying things to yourself that will help you feel calm and secure. For example, you might say to yourself “I am calm and relaxed” or “I am the best caregiver I can be.”



Theresa, caregiver

5 ways to carve out some “ME” time

Give yourself permission to rest and to do things for yourself. You will be a better caregiver for it. Here are 5 easy ways to carve out some personal time.

- 1 Acknowledge** that you need the time and that it’s important to take time for yourself on a regular basis
- 2 Get others to agree** to your “me” time if it would help you to feel less hesitant or guilty to take that time
- 3 Make it a priority**—do it for your loved one if you can’t do it for yourself
- 4 Make this a scheduled appointment time** and commit to it
- 5 Get recharged**—figure out what would help you the most

“I was able to take a break by heading off to a local hotel for a night. My mom stayed with Sean so I could get away and recharge.”

—Allison, caregiver

Other stress management techniques

- 1 Keep to usual activities and routines. This includes your hobbies, sports and exercise programs, spending time with friends and other family members, and work projects. It may help to give you some normalcy at a time when everything may seem upside down.
- 2 Add breaks/relaxation to your routine. Set aside 15-30 minutes a day as your time. Put it in your daily schedule or planner to make sure that it happens everyday. Use the time to lie down and close your eyes, listen to music, sit outside, take a walk, read a chapter of a book, look through a newspaper or magazine, or call a friend.
- 3 “Medical-free zone” take breaks from discussing cancer and other medical things by creating a “med-free zone.” Together with your loved-one, family, and/or friends, designate an hour or a whole evening when talking about medical topics is “off limits.”
- 4 Find surprising places to take a mental break. You can take a mental break in your car on the way to work or to the grocery store. Put on some upbeat music and just move around in your seat or sing. While waiting in line somewhere, try to think of three things for which to be thankful or grateful today.
- 5 Get away for a night if you can. Take a brief vacation, even if only for one night, alone, with your loved one, or with friends. It is amazing how even one night away can help you to feel like you have been gone longer. It can help you and/or your loved one break out of the everyday routine and get a fresh start or perspective.

Chapter Recap:

Before the pressure of being a caregiver causes you to burst, figure out what’s causing you excess stress, and then use the quick and easy exercises in this chapter to relax and recharge.

You can get started right away, using the 5-minute recharges outlined in this chapter. And then fit in as many of these as you can into your daily routine:

- *Let music take you away*
- *Breathe your way to a peaceful state*
- *Let yourself be guided into relaxation*
- *Let the pictures in your mind distract you*
- *Carve out some “me” time*

Visit **BeTheMatch.org/companion** for a list of resources and tips to help you relax and recharge.

