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## Getting the Most Out of Your Volunteer Experience: Tips for Caregivers

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# Getting the most out of your volunteer experience

## Tips for caregivers

Are you an older adult who is juggling life's demands and trying to find time for yourself? Volunteering is a great way to support your health and well-being while making a difference in your community.

Volunteering has been linked to a number of positive outcomes for older adults such as good health and mental health, social connections, and a sense of purpose. However, for many older adults, especially caregivers, finding the time and energy to volunteer can be a challenge.

A recent study was carried out with older adult volunteers and volunteer managers across the country to understand how busy older adults can successfully manage their multiple commitments. Based on that survey, as many as 35% of current volunteers are also caregivers, meaning they are caring for someone 18 or older who is unable to care for themselves.

*Here's what we learned about volunteering from other caregivers:*

### Benefits of volunteering

Caregivers reported that volunteering:

- Gave them new skills and techniques to improve the care they provide to their loved one.
- Provided them with new “ideas” or “advice” gained from other volunteers or service recipients that enhanced their own caregiving.
- Gave them the opportunity to learn about programs and resources, like Medicare, insurance, and financial and aging services, that could support them as caregivers or support their care recipient.
- Provided an opportunity to make new friends and socialize.
- Provided a valuable and temporary reprieve from caregiving responsibilities.

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I get to talk to others who do caregiving and get ideas on **how to do things more efficiently.**

Volunteer

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One of our volunteers takes her husband with her to a food distribution. He sits there in a wheelchair and watches while she works. **She says they both enjoy getting out.**

Volunteer Manager

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For the short time I am volunteering... **it is like a vacation from my caregiving.** I am able to put my worries on hold.”

Volunteer

## Managing stress

Caregivers were more likely to report role-related strain than volunteers who did not have caregiving responsibilities. However, caregivers found volunteering rewarding and beneficial. They offered suggestions for combating stress. Caregivers use the following strategies to reduce stress and stay involved in volunteer work:

- **Finding volunteer opportunities that provide a “different” experience from caregiving:** By connecting with a different type of experience, volunteers report a sense of reprieve. For example, some caregivers enjoy volunteering with children as a change of pace from providing care to an older adult.
- **Finding volunteer opportunities that provide a similar experience or use similar skills to caregiving:** For some caregivers, volunteering is a way to use their skills and experience in similar ways to their caregiving. For these volunteers, providing friendly visiting to another older adult or using similar care skills is a rewarding experience.
- **Time management:** Many caregivers report that volunteering helps them to better manage and prioritize their limited time.
- **Taking a break:** Talk with your volunteer program about taking a temporary break from volunteering when you need it.
- **Arrange for respite care:** Caregivers often rely on respite care, provided by friends and family, to give them the chance to leave the house and volunteer. Respite care may also be available through your local Retired and Senior Volunteer Program or Senior Companion Program.
- **Include the care recipient:** Depending on the volunteer assignment, a care recipient may be able to participate alongside the caregiver. Examples of these assignments include activities like meals delivery, senior center volunteering, or food box preparation.
- **Flexible arrangements:** Some volunteer programs offer flexible arrangements for volunteers like job sharing, per diem volunteering, and volunteering for one-time or special events.

Overall, caregivers can benefit from volunteering in their community. Start by having a conversation with a local volunteer program about your needs as a caregiver to find the right fit for you.