YES, YOU CAN!

HOW TO BE A BADASS CAREGIVER *and* TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

Gretchen Staebler, author of *Mother Lode: Confessions of a Reluctant Caregiver*
Available wherever books are sold.

by

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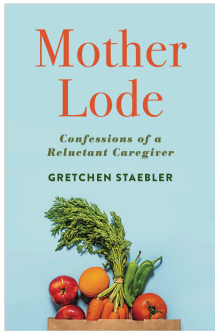

"She promises one year, living with her stubbornly independent 96-year-old mother, cleaning out the house her parents had stashed musty history in for five decades, and getting her mother moved elsewhere. Four years later, the author is still trying to stay sane in the face of her mother's increasing dementia, fighting old battles and learning respect and acceptance."

For a direct link to the website and ordering links.

Introduction: You Can't Pour from an Empty Vessel

First let me say, if you are a family caregiver or care partner for a family member or friend (living nearby or not so near), you are a Hero, a Warrior, a total Badass. Walking with my mother through her last years, was the hardest job I ever had including parenting, though maybe memory fails me and I know I had it easy compared to so many. My crown is off to you. And the hardest thing when you are doing the hardest job is taking care of you.

You hear it from everywhere: "You have to take care of yourself." And if you are one of the fifty-three million family caregivers in the US, the platitudes are met with a scoff, if not an outright peal of falling-on-the-floor laughter. *"Sorry, Mom, I can't help you in the bathroom right now, I'm meditating."* Right. It takes a lot of work to figure out how to take care of you, and in light of everything else you are doing, it seems like a bridge too far. And yet, you know it's true.

This workbook is not a comprehensive study of self care, but I hope it gets you started on a path toward better health and more happiness, guiding you to the *seemingly* impossible: to move self-care from the bottom of the priority list to the top. I suggest printing out the pages and taking your time (since you may only have bits of it anyway) and carefully considering the exercises. Return to them as often as needed, your responses may change.

A Word about Journaling: Some of the exercises suggest writing out a narrative rather than simply filling in the blanks. Of course, you can use a notebook or a sticky note or a napkin. OR go ahead and buy yourself a journal (a pretty one or one that makes you laugh) you deserve a gift to yourself, and it may become your best friend.

> **When you do a journaling exercise:** Write the prompt at the top of the page. Take a deep breath and put the pen on the paper. Don't stop to think, don't lift the pen; go where the pen goes. You may end somewhere you didn't expect, and maybe not in response to where you started.That's okay! That's perfect! That's your heart talking louder than your brain. If you feel yourself stopping your brain *really* wants be back in charge just write "*keep going, keep going, keep going*" (or whatever comes to mind) until your heart is back in control. You might want to set a timer for five or seven minutes to help get it all out.

Okay, let's get started. Remember, you are a Badass Caregiver!

Take Your Pulse

By checking in with your feelings, you can name them, acknowledge them, figure out where they are coming from, consider how best to deal with them, or let them go. It's common for caregivers to feel anger, fear, sadness, frustration, loneliness, exhaustion. Be still and notice what's going on. It's okay to feel whatever you are feeling.

Take a quick emotional temperature each morning, mid-day, and evening. Consider what has or hasn't happened that plays into your temperature. But now, let's take a deep dive.

Exercise #1: Take Your Emotional Temperature

1. I'm emotionally exhausted. Yes ____ No ____ Not sure ____ Say more:

2. I'm physically exhausted. Yes ____ No ____ Not sure ____ Say more:

3. I'm resentful. Yes ____ No ____ Not sure ____ Say more:

4. I'm angry. Yes ____ No ____ Not sure ____ Say more:

5. My relationships with friends are suffering. Yes ____ No ____ Not sure ____ Say more:

6. My relationships with family are suffering. Yes ____ No ____ Not sure ____ Say more:

7. My relationship with [care recipient] is suffering. Yes ____ No ____ Not sure ____ Say more:

8. My relationship with myself is suffering. Yes ____ No ____ Not sure ____ Say more:

9. My health is declining. Yes ____ No ____ Not sure ____ Say more:

10. My family and I are prepared for the future, come what may. Yes ____ No ____
Not sure ____ Say more:

If you answered "no" to questions 1-9 and "yes" to number 10, good for you. You can stop here. Or you can keep going and plan ahead. Because chances are excellent that eventually your responses will change, whether or not you admit it to anyone. And maybe you were just a smidge untruthful in your answers? Repeat the exercise every day for the next week, see if your the responses are different.

Admit — Commit — Permit

Caregivers are overloaded with responsibilities. You may ask, **"How can I FIND time for self-care?"** If you want to relieve your stress and feel better, *change the question*. Instead, ask, **"How do I MAKE time for self-care?"** The answer is to admit, permit, and commit to practicing healthy self-care. (Jane Hamilton, MSN, RN; www.partnersonthepath.com)

Step one: *Admit*
Admit taking care of you is important, and that you aren't doing enough of it.

Step two: *Permit*
Permit yourself to make time for you a priority.

Step three: *Commit*
Commit to finding a solution, or at least to making a beginning.

Exercise #2: Admit
What I am currently doing for myself:

_____ _____

_____ _____

_____ _____

_____ _____

Exercise #3: Journal—What I did BC.

What did you do Before Caregiving (remember that?) that you no longer do, or what did you dream that never manifested? Write a narrative of what you miss, perhaps haven't even noticed you no longer do, what it meant to you, why you let it go, if you would like to do it again.

Exercise #4: What would I like to be doing, or doing more of?

Be specific; brainstorm small *and* dream big, you never know what might be possible (and daydreaming is relaxing). Send that judgey naysayer voice to the back seat, it has no place here, and certainly should never be allowed to drive.

___	_____	___	_____
___	_____	___	_____
___	_____	___	_____
___	_____	___	_____
___	_____	___	_____
___	_____	___	_____
___	_____	___	_____
___	_____	___	_____
___	_____	___	_____

Return to your list and in that first little space, enter a 1, 2, or 3 based on your current reality. Which ones might you make a priority to figure out right now? And then? And someday? We'll figure out how next.

Say it out loud: "I admit, I need to take better care of myself."

Exercise #6: Permit

Journal—What is keeping me from taking time for me?

What stories do you tell yourself about why you haven't (recently, or maybe ever) done things that are just for yourself? Some common excuses are:

"No one can care for my loved one as well as I can."

"My parent took care of me when I was a child, I owe it to them."

"I committed to/want to be here for my loved one [maybe promised "in sickness and in health"]. Time away is a violation of my promise."

"To take time for me is selfish."

"There's no one to take my place."

"It's impossible."

Take 5-10 minutes to write in your journal. Remember, don't lift the pen, just keep writing.

OR YOU CAN WRITE IT HERE. OR DRAW A DOODLE OF YOU MAKING EXCUSES.

Now that you know where you're coming from, you will have a better idea of where you need to go. (By the way, none of those examples are reason not to take care of you. None. Of. Them.)

Say it out loud: "I give myself permission to do something for me."

Exercise #5: Commit

Grab a highlighter. Highlight at least three #1 things from Exercise 4 that are your favorites or that feel doable.

Commit to finding a way to make them happen. Go ahead, say it out loud. You don't need to know how yet.

Now look to the future, when might you add a #2 or even a #3? What would need to happen to make it possible? Highlight one of each to work toward.

Move in small steps if you need to. e.g. #1s: Maybe a coffee shop date with either yourself or a friend once a week seems like a stretch, but you could start with 15 minutes every day to write in your journal. Later, if your care recipient can't be left alone, maybe you can find a helper. #2s: Perhaps an overnight retreat seems a bit out of reach, but is something to work toward. Maybe four, or five, or six hours of away time is possible in the interim. (Did I hear a scoff? Back seat it.) #3s: Yeah, you're probably not going to Italy anytime soon, but boy howdy, you would like to some day. And maybe a step in that direction is to visit your grandchildren in another state. Rather that saying you *can't* do it, consider what you *can* do.

Say it out loud: "I commit to finding a way to take better care of myself."

I Am Invincible! I Am Tired.

Now that you've committed to better self-care, let's figure out how to make it happen. (Oops, you didn't exactly commit? Back up. Do it again.)

When you have committed, create a list of all the things you regularly do for your care recipient, or for which you have primary responsibility. (Cook meals, read aloud, transport to doctors, take to church, bathe, prepare meds, laundry, take for walks, pay bills, clean the house . . .). Use another page, if you need it. Put an ✘ by things you *maybe* could let go of (i.e. not do at all). Put a ✓ by those someone else *potentially* could do (don't worry about who right now).

Exercise #7: Holy wow, look at all I do!

Make Asking for Help Your Super Power!

Among the most difficult things for caregivers (or anyone, really) to do is ask for help. But caregiving is not a solo occupation, or at least it shouldn't be, and it needn't be. Why are we humans so reluctant to ask for help? ("People are busy," "This is mine to bear," "I *should* be able to do this myself," "It's easier to do it myself" . . .) I'll leave that to psychologists to tease out. What we are going to do here is interrupt the cycle.

Exercise #8: Journal What keeps me from asking for help?

Set a timer for five minutes and write without stopping.

Exercise #9: Gather Your Village

First draw a big X through everything you wrote for #8. We're moving on.

Make a list of people who love you or who love your care recipient. They might live close by, they might live far away, they might be family (currently involved or uninvolved) or friends. Your list might also include (hopefully) another family caregiver. Don't limit your list to those you think could or would help. Add to the list as you think of new possibilities.

Exercise #10: Outsourcing Brainstorm

Brainstorm a list of things you would love someone else to do. Be creative, fanciful if you want (laughter is good medicine), but use a dose of realism too. Just fill in the task list for now. Some examples: cook a meal or package homemade soup for the freezer; read to Mom for thirty minutes once a week; do your grocery shopping or pick up your online order or stay with Dad while you go; check in with you by phone, text, email once a day; be your dedicated listener to rants (maybe this will be another caregiver who will have a unique understanding and empathy and might have suggestions, and you can be there for her or him too); help you clean the kitchen; visit your care recipient in assisted living; send a card to your mom regularly, or to you; stay with your partner while you get a massage or a pedicure; pay for a housecleaner or a part-time care helper.

Yes, there are lots of blanks, there are lots of tasks; fill them in as you think of them. We'll think about who next; for now, just the what.

Asked	*Task*	*Who?*	*Who else?*
____	_____	_____,	_____
____	_____	_____,	_____
____	_____	_____,	_____
____	_____	_____,	_____
____	_____	_____,	_____
____	_____	_____,	_____
____	_____	_____,	_____
____	_____	_____,	_____

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Now look at your village list and fill in the "who" column. Your "too busy" or far away brother may say no, he won't pay for housecleaning; or maybe he will say yes, glad for a hands-off way to feel better about himself. Or maybe he will say no, then reconsider later. If you believe he can afford it, keep asking. It's so hard to make the ask when you are already doing so much hard stuff, but most people will be glad to know how they can help, because they love you! (In a best-of-all-world's scenario, people would make specific offers of help, knowing how hard it is to ask, but we probably aren't there yet.)

Try to play to each person's strength; make it hard for them to say "no." Don't ask your sister-in-law to spend an afternoon with your mother when you know she is ill-suited or will say no. Shaming is not the point here. If she loves to bake, ask her to make banana bread.

If your friend breezily says, "Let me know how I can help!" have three things ready to suggest.

Choose the easiest thing to start with. Then one more. Then one more.

Okay, you're ready. Put on your cape. Start asking! You've got this.

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Tools to Get You Through the Mucky Middle

Hopefully you are on your way to finding help and creating time for you. And there is still the madness of being the primary physical and/or emotional caregiver most of the time, whether your loved one lives with you or lives nearby, either alone or in a care facility. You need tools.

There are so many times you feel like you are losing your mind, you are completely overwhelmed, you are in the middle of a crazy-making conversation, your care recipient is criticizing you *again*, your parent has pushed a button that may throw you back into your adolescent relationship with them. You need a tool for right now, and you need tools for the aftermath. Your loved one may forget the incident immediately, but it lingers on in you.

Exercise #12: Journal—Writing down the story.

After each incident of something going sideways, when you have a moment (I really suggest spending a few minutes with your journal every day), write down what happened, how you reacted, what happened next.

Here's one of mine:

1. Mama told me I put the silverware wrong end up in the dishwasher and she stabbed herself.
2. I snapped. I screamed at her that one of the holiday guests loaded the dishwasher, not me! I follow the rule of the forks religiously. Then I threw in the kitchen sink, screaming: "Why do I have to go to three grocery stores to get the brands you insist on, but when someone else takes you shopping, you get a forbidden one?"
3. She fell apart, stumbling to her bedroom in tears (a rare emotional event). Later my visiting sister told me she was crying that she hates herself and shouldn't be alive. I hate myself too.

Here's how it could have gone with tools:

1. Mama: "You put the silverware wrong end up in the dishwasher."
2. Me: Does shuni mudra* while taking a deep breath, then says, "I'm sorry."

You will fail to use a tool again and again. Write down what happened, forgive yourself, try again next time. Write down successes too! You will get better.

Tools for Right Now

* *Shuni mudra (the Seal of Patience): tap your thumb and middle finger together, a signal to take a deep breath and wait before you speak.
* Put yourself in time out: don't you suddenly need to go to the bathroom, feed the fish?
* Go for a walk, even just around the house, or up and down a hallway.
* Call or text that trusted friend or fellow caregiver from your village.
* Write in your journal. Start a blog! It's free and can be private, shared only with besties.
* Keep a gratitude jar: Be mindful of what you are grateful for that bird at the feeder, today's sunrise or sunset, a good interaction. Write it on a slip of paper and put it in a jar. When things are not going well, pull one out and bring it back to mind. Breathe it in.
* Start an online support group of friends. Private Facebook groups are great for this.
* Create a ritual for yourself, or for you and your care recipient (e.g. a daily cup of tea together).
* Remind yourself "this is not your forever."
* Drink water (make sure you are getting enough every day).
* Get moving or slow down and breathe. Do "legs up the wall" yoga pose for five minutes. Do "Breath of Joy." (Google them.)
* Forgive yourself you are a good person.
* Forgive your care recipient this is not his or her essence. Keep handy a photo of them in better days.
* Remember your job is to keep your loved one safe, *not* happy at all times. Chances are you will not be successful at that anyway.
* Let go of the need to be right. This one is huge and hard. You can't argue with dementia.
* Create and go to your place of sanctuary (a chair in the corner, your bedroom, the bathroom add some calming visuals). Meditate or pray or breathe in nature every day. Sit in the sun.
* Stop scrolling social media and check in with a friend in real time instead.
* Have a good cry.
* Don't obsess in the middle of the night. If your monkey mind won't shut up, write it down to review in the morning. Everything looks worse in the middle of the night.
* Remember to take your emotional temperature. Pay attention to how you are feeling.

Tools for the Unknown Future

Knowing some things are in place will give you peace of mind as you face the uncertainty.

Medical journal

Have a small notebook and pen to take to every medical appointment. Note vitals and everything the care provider says. Your loved one may not remember or will misremember, or doesn't believe you when you repeat it later; it may help to quote the professional. It's also helpful to have the previous notes at subsequent visits or when seeing a different specialist.

Prepare a To-Go Bag (a list is on the next page)

When caring for an elderly or ill person, you literally never know when an emergency will send you to the hospital. You may return home after a few hours, discharged from the emergency room (and that is never less than several hours); or your care recipient may be admitted, and who knows when you will get home again. Have a grab and go bag at the ready and a list of other things to remember to take.

Get financial and legal documents and medical directives in order (an adapted list from AARP is on page 18). Hopefully this has been or can be done while your loved one is still able to make decisions. Don't delay, it's not as hard to talk about as you think it will be. Know where documents are kept and make sure they are up-to-date. Know where pins, passwords, and log-ins are. Find an eldercare attorney for a consultation.

Create boundaries. Are you willing to keep your loved one at home as long as it takes, or not? Is a two-week vacation, or a day a week off a non-negotiable? What about your weekly yoga class? Do you expect to be compensated for caregiving? Get expectations in writing to (hopefully) avoid later clashes with family members. There is no shame in saying what you can't do; but focus on what you can/will do. (e.g. "I can't live in; I *can* manage paid caregivers.")

Research care facilities and put your loved one's name on the wait list. Find resources and cost of in-home care. You may hope to keep your loved one at home until the end, but circumstances can turn on a dime. It may not be possible, and that is okay. It is (hopefully) a small, refundable fee to have your care recipient on a waiting list at a care home. The time to research what's available (and how to pay for it) is before you need it. Be prepared.

Learn about dementia. Though it may not always keep your frustration in check, it helps to know what is happening in the brain. Why doesn't she like food she used to like? Why is he always cold? Why do they make stuff up? Why doesn't she appreciate me? Knowledge is power. And an eldercare therapist is money well spent. Find out what's available in your area.

Your Hospital Toolbox

For your loved one:

* List of medications, up-to-date, with dosage and schedule, prescribing doctor
* Doctors and pharmacies (both local and online)
* Blanket (the ER will probably have warmed blankets ask! but you may need your own while you wait for admission.)
* Warm socks and a sweater
* Hearing aids and storage box, extra batteries
* Glasses and case
* Lip balm
* Medical notes notebook/pen
* Advance Directive (DNR and POLST or MOLST, see next page)
* Medical cards, SSN, driver's license or state ID card
* Medications in case of admission
* Organ donor documents
* Phone numbers, either to let friends and relatives know what's happened, and/or to ask someone to come to the hospital to give you a break. At *least* two emergency contact persons, including the order in which people should be contacted. You may want to create a phone tree so only one person need be called and they call the next person on the list. (If you have a supportive, local sibling or friend, *do* ask them to meet you at the ER. Two is so much better than one.)

For you:

Electronics and chargers	Tissues/hand sanitizer/wipes
Book/e-Book	Neck pillow
Snacks/Tea bags/Water bottle	Cozy, warm clothes
Medical POA	Journal and pen

Additions:

_____ _____ _____

_____ _____ _____

Tools for the End

Legal Documents

* Advance Directives including Living Will and Health Care Power of Attorney.
* Will or Trust is there one? is it up-to-date?
* End of life instructions, including donor wishes, burial or cremation plans, location, prepaid funeral plans, mortuary and wishes for services.

Financial and Property Documents

* Durable Power of Attorney for yourself documenting your ability to manage financial matters.
* Get beneficiaries on all bank and investments accounts to avoid probate.
* Know where records are: Bank and investment accounts. Safety deposit box location, permission to access, and keys. Property and mortgage documents; automatic payment information. Automobile information. Insurance policies. Location of access information for everything: login names, passwords, PINs.

Medical Directives

(The DNR and the POLST are not the same thing. You need both.)

* DNR (Do Not Resuscitate orders). Both you and the primary care physician should have copies. Things change, make sure it is up-to-date.
* POLST or MOLST (Physician's/Portable/Medical Order for Life Sustaining Treatment.) Both you and the primary care physician should have copies. One should be posted where an EMT will see it. Get the form from your doctor or download it. (They are usually printed on a bright color, see if your area uses lime green or pink.)

Remember, all of these things can change, so keep them current, and try apps and websites such as Dropbox, Evernote, or OneNote to store and organize them so they are at your fingertips any time on your phone, tablet, or computer *and* easy to share with other family members. Technology really can make your life easier! (Except when it makes you crazy.)

Visit my website for more resources, videos, tips and tools, and more.
www.gretchenstaebler.com

Resources for the Mucky Middle

The ideas in this workbook are not meant to be a comprehensive list, but a beginning point. Here are some additional resources. In the end, though, you will figure out what works for you. The important thing is, make time in your life for you. Not *find* time, but *make* time. It's not just "nice," it's critical. Let me say that again: It's not optional. Your health and your life depend on it.

Books

Self-Care for Caregivers: A Practical Guide to Caring for You While You Care for Your Loved One, by Susanne White

Advice for Future Corpses (and Those Who Love Them): A Practical Perspective on Death and Dying, by Sallie Tisdale

Another Country: Navigating the Emotional Terrain of Our Elders, by Mary Pipher

A Bittersweet Season: Caring for Our Aging Parents — and Ourselves, by Jane Gross

Websites

TeepaSnow.com For help understanding dementia and a positive approach to care. (Including videos and podcasts.)

DailyCaring.com AARP website for family caregivers.

HappyHealthyCaregiver.com Ways to integrate self-care with caregiving. (Including podcasts and videos)

EldercareCounselor.com Serving those who are caring for aging family members, older adults, and those living with chronic medical conditions. (Including podcasts.) (Located in Olympia, WA, but services are also available online.)

Area Agency on Aging Eldercare.ACL.gov. Look for your local or regional agency.

Facebook Support Groups for Caregivers (These groups are private, vetted, and monitored)

Get in the Lifeboat

Slow Medicine

AARP Family Caregivers Discussion Group

Family Caregivers Support Group

One More Fun Thing

What are 20 things you would like to do in 2023 (or in the next 12 months)? Read twelve books? Write it in one of the boxes, add twelve small boxes to check them off. Get six massages? Take a small road trip? Learn to make Pad Thai? Find an online or in-person yoga class? Have coffee with a friend once a month? Walk in a local park once a week? Go camping? Add color and drawings to your boxes. Put it on your wall where you will see it every day. It's fine to leave blank boxes to add things when your imagination is sparked. Now, go forth and make them happen! **Yes, you can!** (Thank you to Happy Healthy Caregiver.)

20 for 2023	**1.**	**2.**
3.	**4.**	**5.**
6.	**7.**	**8.**
9.	**10.**	**11.**
12.	**13.**	**14.**
15.	**16.**	**17.**
18.	**19.**	**20.**

HappyHealthyCaregiver.com | Share your list: #20for2023 and Tag HHC!

Almost everything on these pages comes under the heading, *Things I Wish I Had Known*. Not everything will work in your unique situation (or every time), but I hope you find some useful ideas and can adapt them to work for you. Remember, it's just a beginning. If you received this workbook because you subscribed to my e-Letter, you already know about my website. If you received it at a workshop, I hope you will visit the website and subscribe to the monthly e-Letter. Resources, blog posts (my stories and your stories), tips and tools, even recipes are added regularly. The e-Letter will keep you informed of what's new on the website. I encourage sharing of your caregiving stories on the website (send via the contact page), and the responses of the community.

"We're all just walking each other home." Ram Dass

Heart-fully,

gretchen