

## Taking care of someone sick <sup>[1]</sup>

Dear Alice,

My partner is always getting colds, sinus infections, and other nasties during cold and flu season. I've seen him through strep throat, stomach flu, and 16 months of sinus infection flare-ups. It's important to me to take care of him when he's ill, and I know he appreciates the help, but during the school year I get nervous about the risk to my own health and the potential for missing classes/work. What are some ways (short of wearing a mask...) to keep myself from catching all of his bugs without leaving him sick, sad, and lonely?

### Answer

Dear Reader,

Your partner is lucky to have you to take care of him when he's ill, and it's great that you're considering your own health in the process. Staying healthy as a caregiver involves more than just avoiding your partner's germs — it also means actively practicing self-care and prioritizing your own needs. While wearing a mask is one strategy that can be used, there are a number of other ways to support your partner.

As you're considering how to take care of yourself so that you can be prepared to take care of your significant other, you may consider prioritizing some self-care strategies, including:

- Maintaining a healthy diet with lots of fruits and veggies
- Regularly being physically active
- Getting plenty of sleep
- Getting a flu vaccination <sup>[2]</sup>, and routinely going to your health care provider for checkups
- Practicing good hand washing hygiene <sup>[3]</sup>. When you don't have easy access to soap and water, hand sanitizer with an alcohol content of at least 60 percent could be used as the secondary line of defense.
- Making sure to disinfect doorknobs, phones, remote controls, or any other hard surfaces that bacteria and viruses may linger on can also prevent the spread of germs.

Further, some viruses may be transmitted through airborne droplets, so you may want to give your partner a wide berth while he's coughing and sneezing. In the case of new and contagious

viruses, such as [COVID-19](#) [4], some harsher measures are helpful in reducing transmission. Staying in separate rooms, having your partner wear a mask (and wearing one yourself), avoiding sharing household items, and cleaning frequently touched surfaces with disinfectant, are some useful steps to take.

Beyond the possibility of catching your partner's illness, caregivers often report feeling overwhelmed, stressed out, frustrated, and depressed by the challenging task of caring for someone while dealing with their other responsibilities. These feelings may have as much of an impact on your physical and mental health as germs themselves. Taking a break from caregiving once in a while may be a helpful way to focus on your own well-being. Going out with friends, working out, or treating yourself occasionally can help you stay positive and lower your stress levels. Also being sure that you're seeing health care providers and mental health professionals when needed can help keep you going.

And if it seems like you don't have time or have too much to do, there are ways to set boundaries. While caring for your partner may be a priority for you, there might be certain tasks that you're less willing to perform or certain moments where you may have reduced capacity to give. Communicating that to your partner and negotiating ways that you can help within your boundaries could allow you feel like a supportive partner, while keeping your mental and physical health in mind. Appealing to outside support is another option for when you're feeling overwhelmed. A sick partner, school, and work is a lot to manage on your own, and you may have friends and family who are willing to help out but don't know exactly how — until you reach out to them.

It can be helpful to remember that by keeping yourself healthy and happy, you'll be able to more effectively care for your partner and keep up with your other obligations.

To your health!

Alice!

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Published date:

Oct 11, 2013

Last reviewed on:

Apr 24, 2020

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