

# Striking a Balance as a Patient and Caregiver

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After years of swimming in the deep end of healthcare as a patient, I'm wading in the shallows of caregiving. A week ago, my husband, Patrick, began treatment for high blood pressure.

Last Thursday, the cuff of my blood pressure monitor hissed loudly instead of inflating. I asked Patrick to help me retrieve an old monitor I had stashed away on the top shelf of a kitchen cabinet. After putting in new batteries, I tested it out to make sure it still worked. My blood pressure registered at its usual level, and out of curiosity, I asked Patrick if he wanted to check his.

He sat next to me on the sofa as I placed the cuff securely around his arm. I pressed the start button, and we watched the digital numbers steadily climb. My blood pressure usually runs 100/65 (anything below 120/80 is considered normal). I expected Patrick's to be higher than mine. However, when the monitor beeped and displayed 160/95, I was astonished. Noting my puzzled and concerned look, Patrick asked if the numbers were bad. I was unsure, so we put the cuff on his other arm and checked it again.

When the second reading turned out similar, we Googled the results. According to the American Heart Association, Patrick had stage 2 hypertension, one level below a hypertensive crisis that would require immediate medical attention.

If his high blood pressure weren't terrible enough, I flashed back to a few days earlier when Patrick came home early from work because he wasn't feeling well and his chest hurt. When I had asked if the pain was inside or on the muscle outside, Patrick motioned from the left side of his chest, around the side of his ribcage, and up to his shoulder blade.

I told myself that maybe he had strained his muscles that weekend from unloading two heavy wall cabinets from my car. My instinct made me worry that it was his heart, and his high blood pressure intensified my suspicions.

Patrick was scheduled to fly out of town the following afternoon, so he made an appointment with his doctor first thing Friday morning. The doctor prescribed metoprolol, a beta blocker used to treat hypertension, and advised him to cancel his trip. The doctor also ordered bloodwork and scheduled a follow-up appointment in two weeks.

Until Patrick's blood pressure returns to normal, we're treating this as a chronic condition. While he doesn't require 24-hour care, I've assumed a caregiver role, and I'm beginning to question my ability to be one. Whether it's my need for control or my decades of experience as a patient, I've been expecting my husband to be as fastidious about his healthcare as I am about mine.

I'm proactive in my healthcare, asking questions and taking notes. I review my lab results and chart my blood pressure, temperature, and weight every morning to check for any abnormalities or drastic changes. My hepatologist calls me her favorite patient because I'm so compliant, following every order and taking my medications religiously.

Patrick, on the other hand, is more lackadaisical. I've shown him how to use the blood pressure monitor, but he forgets to take it first thing in the morning before he becomes active. I then find myself asking him if he has checked it once or twice again later in the day after taking his medication.

We became frustrated with each other when the doctor's office called with his lab results. Patrick told me "everything was OK." When I pressed for specifics, such as the type of tests they ran, the response he gave me was "whatever they usually test for." After going back and forth, Patrick finally called the office to ask for the results again. From what I could infer from the conversation, the doctor ran a comprehensive metabolic panel to check his glucose level and liver and kidney functions.

I'm compassionate and empathetic, so I hate feeling like a nagging wife. If my husband were unable to do things for himself, I would have more patience. I'm struggling with wanting him to take an active role so that he's not dependent on me. The problem isn't that I don't care, but I care too much. If I don't have all the information, I feel helpless, and I can't seem to get

the answers I need unless I ask the questions. By relieving his stress, I'm potentially aggravating my own, thus putting me at risk for a flare. How do I balance self-care with caring with him so we don't both end up in the hospital?

We're only at the end of week one, so we're still figuring this out together. Isn't that what marriage is all about?

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