

What Dolly Can Teach Us About Caring for the Caregiver

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Dolly Parton died late last month at age 80 following what her family called a “brief battle” with cancer. The worldwide, heartfelt tributes that followed focused, rightly, on her legacy not only in music, but in stories of her generosity and kindness spanning over her sixty years in the public eye. There is no doubt that Dolly will be remembered as one of the most beloved figures in American culture. Tucked inside the coverage of her extraordinary life, however, was her final year, which told a much quieter story. That story deserves its own moment of attention, not because it explains her death, but because it is a pattern that so many caregivers will recognize in themselves and may have contributed to it.

The Caregiver Ignoring Her Own Health

After her husband, Carl Dean, died in March 2025, Dolly spoke openly about the toll caregiving had taken on her. She shared candidly that she had been dealing with health issues of her own, which she gladly set aside while Carl was ill. In fact, following his death, she described her state as “worn down and worn out,” reflecting on her grief and the toll the years of caretaking that preceded it.

Dolly was not a woman without resources; she had access to the best medical care money could buy, a devoted circle of family and friends, a strong faith, and a public platform to talk about what she was going through. And still, by her own account, she put her health on the back burner and chose not to share the incredible toll caregiving was taking on her while she was living it.

I think that is also a part of Dolly’s legacy, and a topic worth sitting with: if someone with every advantage can lose track of her own well-being while caring for a loved one, what does that suggest about the millions of us doing the same thing with far fewer resources, far less support, and far less room to admit they are struggling?

The Pattern Isn’t Rare — It’s the Norm

Caregiver self-neglect is well-documented: it is not anecdotal. Statistics show that nearly two in five caregivers have at least two chronic diseases of their own. Family caregivers routinely delay their own doctor’s appointments, skip screenings, ignore symptoms, and allow their own chronic conditions to go unmanaged all the while managing someone else’s illness, medications, and activities of daily living.

The costs of ignoring one’s own care do not always end dramatically. Sometimes it is a persistent cough that is only managed by copious amounts of lozenges, or blood pressure that remains high and untreated, bone-tired exhaustion that is never named as anything more serious than “tired.” In fact, Dolly’s own language, “worn down, worn out,” is exactly how so many caregivers describe themselves, usually downplaying, always in passing, and too often without seeking help for it.

What This Isn't

To be clear about what this piece is not saying: there's no basis for claiming that caregiving caused Dolly's cancer or her subsequent death. Her family cited a brief illness, and drawing a straight line from caretaking to cancer is, no doubt, a distortion.

What can be said, though, is that there are millions of those of us who live it, and indeed, Dolly said it herself: she set her own needs aside for a long stretch of time while caring for someone she loved. That care and devotion left her depleted in ways she was still wrangling with when she died last week.

The Lesson

If you are currently a caregiver for a spouse, a parent, or a child, the takeaway should not be the ways in which you fail to care for your own health. Rather, it is permission. Permission to keep your own appointments. Permission to admit the fatigue that you are experiencing is worth mentioning to a doctor, instead of just pushing through. Permission to ask for help before you are "worn down and worn out," rather than after.

Dolly Parton spent her career dazzling us with her beautiful voice, her songwriting prowess, sharing other people's stories, and giving generously to causes far beyond herself — literacy, LGBTQIA advocacy, vaccine research, disaster relief - just to name a few. After Carl died, she was honest about the one place she had not been as generous: with herself. That honesty is worth more than a cautionary tale about Dolly specifically. It should be a nudge to the rest of us, quietly doing the same thing right now, and telling ourselves that it is ok to put our own well-being aside.

It probably isn't. And it's worth checking.