A Self-Care Manifesto for Caregivers to the Dying and the Bereaved

We who care for the bereaved and the dying have a wondrous opportunity: to help others embrace and grow through grief—and to lead fuller, more deeply-lived lives ourselves because of this important work.

But our work is draining—physically, emotionally and spiritually. We must first care for ourselves if we want to care well for others. This manifesto is intended to empower you to practice good self-care.

1. *I deserve to lead a joyful, whole life.*
No matter how much I love and value my work, my life is multi-faceted. My family, my friends, my other interests and my spirituality also deserve my time and attention. I deserve my time and attention.

2. *My work does not define me.* I am a unique, worthy person outside my work life. While relationships can help me feel good about myself, they are not what is inside me. Sometimes I need to stop "doing" and instead focus on simply "being."

3. *I am not the only one who can help dying and bereaved people.* When I feel indispensable, I tend to ignore my own needs. There are many talented caregivers in my community who can also help the dying and the bereaved.

4. *I must develop healthy eating, sleeping and exercise patterns.* I am aware of the importance of these things for those I help, but I may neglect them myself. A well-balanced diet, adequate sleep and regular exercise allow me to be the best I can be.

5. *If I've been overinvolved in my caregiving for too long, I may have forgotten how to take care of myself.* I may need to rediscover ways of caring for and nurturing myself. I may need to relearn how to explore my own feelings instead of focusing on everybody else's.

6. *I must maintain boundaries in my helping relationships.* As a death caregiver, I cannot avoid getting emotionally involved with dying and bereaved people. Nor would I want to. Active empathy allows me to be a good companion to them. However, I must remember I am responsible to others, not for others.

7. *I am not perfect and I must not expect myself to be.* I often wish my helping efforts were always successful. But even when I offer compassionate, "on-target" help, the recipient of that help isn't always prepared to use it. And when I do make mistakes, I should see them as an integral part of learning and growth, not as measurements of my self-worth.

8. *I must practice effective time-management skills.* I must set practical goals for how I spend my time. I must also remember Pareto's principle: twenty percent of what I do nets eighty percent of my results.

9. *I must also practice setting limits and alleviating stresses I can do something about.* I must work to achieve a clear sense of expectations and set realistic deadlines. I should enjoy what I do accomplish in helping others but shouldn't berate myself for what is beyond me.
10. *I must listen to my inner voice.* As a caregiver to the dying and the bereaved, I will at times become grief overloaded. When my inner voice begins to whisper its fatigue, I must listen carefully and allow myself some grief down-time.

11. *I should express the personal me in both my work and play.* I shouldn't be afraid to demonstrate my unique talents and abilities. I must also make time each day to remind myself of what is important to me. If I only had three months to live, what would I do?

12. *I am a spiritual being.* I must spend alone time focusing on self-understanding and self-love. To be present to those I work with and to learn from those I companion, I must appreciate the beauty of life and living. I must renew my spirit.