

With the information provided in mind, develop an essay educating youth how to take care of themselves first, in order to be available to take care of others. Be sure to include specific examples from your own health science education and training. (Formatting is not judged in online submissions)

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have seen a drastic shift in most aspects of our everyday lives. Mental health and family dynamics were no exception to these profound changes. As we moved learning from a classroom to a computer and recess to the backyard, we saw a more interpersonal evolution between family dynamics. Daughters and sons were playing the roles of babysitter and student in typical households and saw an immense struggle between their siblings well-being and their own. However, family's who have a resident dealing with needs that are met with caregiving had an even more difficult time. When lockdown started, professional caregivers were at their own homes and the relatives, especially children, were faced with the consequences. Struggling in a world-wide pandemic is one thing, but caring for an ailing loved one on top of it all is another. Knowing that health professionals of the past, present, and future along with other peers can make it easier when exchanging ideals and tips to help out. This can make a world of difference to those who feel isolated in knowing that your feelings are valid and you are not alone. As an aspiring pediatric cancer physician, an EMT student, and a Neuroscience major, I too have struggled with my own mental health and have worked with others to aid theirs. As the older sibling of a cancer survivor, I have seen the struggles of families with sick loved ones. When my brother was diagnosed with leukemia in 2013 at the age of six, I watched from the other side of the emergency room while my dad supported my mom after we heard the word "cancer." We were all devastated and dealt with it in our own ways. My dad decided to put more work in, my mom stayed home when she could, and I buried myself into extracurriculars at school when I was not at home helping take care of my brother. The caregiver task did not stay at home as I carried the burden with me at school taking precaution when classmates would cough or sneeze and met offers of pity and friendship with shyness. I felt alone and that my only duty as an older sister was to provide the most sterile and healthy environment for my sick little brother. When I met with a Child Life Specialist, it helped as much as an outsider could, but moving schools and joining HOSA was my refuge. I competed in medical terminology in 8th grade to learn terms I heard at doctor's appointments and met a family along the way. 6 years later, I am still in HOSA and have used it as a creative outlet and a social gathering. HOSA taught me about the multiple aspects of health and wellness and I would employ those to caregivers to help them learn to put themselves first and break out of the guilt it can be to do something for yourself and take a "vacation day." With my experiences with my brother and HOSA, I was empowered to pursue Pediatric Hematology/Oncology (kid's cancer doctor) and give back to other multi-child families so they do not bear the burden of mental illness for something out of their control. On my way to medical school, I have started college at Wayne State University as a Neuroscience major. This has allowed me to learn even more about putting mental wellness on my list of priorities as I study the physiology of the brain and its impacts on each and every one of us. We see firsthand the effects of not getting a full night's sleep or pulling an all-nighter in the form of exhaustion, but we do not see the impacts of mental health immediately. I would educate youth caregivers to monitor their emotions and journal to see the impacts themselves. Start counting the days that you do not feel quite like yourself and give yourself time to breathe when you feel your heart start to race. In the words of Rhonda Lee, "Mental illness has a way of taking the center of attention... it owns your thoughts, mood, space, and energy as if you're a part of its existence until you find a way to take back what's been stolen" (Lee, 2019). It is okay not to be okay sometimes, but you should not be losing yourself everyday. Another important aspect to consider as a youth caregiver is how your mental health and wellbeing can impact the lives of those around you, especially those in your care. As a former EMT student, we were taught something surprising by the local Paramedic and Fire Chief. He looked at each and every one of us and made sure we remembered that our health and well-being came first, our partner's second, and our patient last. Each of us, as future health providers, questioned him. "Wasn't patient the most important," one girl asked. He replied with this, "If you are not looking out for yourself, no one else will and if you are incapacitated physically, emotionally, or mentally, you will be jeopardizing your health, your partner's health, and the patient's as

well." As future health professionals, we were stunned, but it clicked. Everyone should know those simple words of yourself first and others after. It is not selfish nor is it ignorant, but it makes all of the surrounding environment safer. This backs up the National Alliance on Mental Health's statement of, "caregivers who pay attention to their own physical and emotional health are better able to handle the challenges of supporting someone with mental illness" (NAMI, n.d.). Regardless of your age, occupation, or background mental health is an important aspect of overall health and it is an especially vital aspect of providing care for someone other than yourself. As a former youth caregiver, a future health professional, and a student, I hope that you too understand the importance of not feeling guilty or isolated about your circumstances. I hope that you understand that your mind is a patient of yourself too, and I hope that you take care of yourself first to better the wellbeing of those around you.