

Managing the Stress of Caregiving

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Caregiving can be rewarding and uplifting, but it can also be draining and exhausting. The demands of providing care to an ill or disabled family member or friend can impact the health and well being of the caregiver— at times resulting in high levels of stress that can lead to depression or burnout.

Physically, care giving can take a toll on individuals; female caregivers particularly tend to report more physical ailments than women who are not providing care. There has even been evidence that mortality rates are higher for caregivers than for non-caregivers.

Each caregiving situation is unique. What is stressful to one may not be stressful to another. However, the first step in managing stress is to be aware of how stress is affecting the caregiver. Here are some of the more common warning signs:

- Ongoing irritation or edginess
- Loss of interest in social activities
- Intense fear of money or the future
- Fatigue or recurring physical problems such as backaches, headaches, or lingering cold or flu symptoms
- Difficulty concentrating
- Depression
- Feeling overwhelmed, trapped or hopeless
- Increasing use of alcohol, overeating, or the use of drugs to relax
- Thoughts of suicide, thoughts of violence or actual acts of violence against the person for whom they are caring.

Yet despite early emotional and physical warning signs family caregivers tend to ignore their bodies and wait until stress becomes severe. Here are some tips that can help to reduce stress, increase energy and enhance overall well being:

- Acknowledge difficult feelings. Caregivers often experience conflicting emotions. Therefore it is important to find quiet moments to get in touch with feelings.
- Find ways to share feelings with friends, family, or clergy.
- Make time for regular exercise, including stretching which releases stress.
- Find something to laugh about. Laughter is like an internal massage.



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- Get 6-8 hours of uninterrupted sleep every night, eat regular healthy meals and drink plenty of water.
- Most important of all get help when you need it.

Getting help may be the most important way to alleviate stress and ultimately caregiver burnout. However it is also what caregivers are the most reluctant to do.

Why is it so hard for Caregivers to reach out and accept help? Caregiving is an act of giving whether by choice or through circumstance. For most people it is much easier to give than to receive and this may be especially so for caregivers who, through their caring roles, give a great deal of themselves. Some of the reasons for this may be:

- A sense of duty or obligation to the care-receiver
- Expectations of family, friends and community
- Not wanting to trouble anyone
- Not wanting to seem demanding
- Feeling uncomfortable about others helping
- Fear of losing their identity or independence
- Feeling that another could not do it as well or as quickly and it's easier to just do it themselves
- Feel that it is a sign of weakness or of not being able to cope
- Feeling that they could not return the help
- The care-receiver may not want others to know how much help they require
- The care-receiver may not want care from anyone else.

A major factor in overcoming the reluctance of the caregiver is identifying what caregivers need in order to feel supported? Some caregivers have stated the need:

- To be able to share their worries, feelings
- To be recognized and acknowledged for care-giving
- To be heard and not taken for granted
- To have social contact and companionship
- To have breaks from care-giving
- To share care giving by involving relatives, friends and neighbors
- To have community awareness and understanding.

Knowing that they are not alone and their needs are important may help them to feel more confident about seeking and accepting help. If you are attempting to



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provide assistance to a caregiver, it may not be easy to know how to support them in their role, however, you may find it helpful to:

- Listen to the caregiver and not assume that you know what their care giving experience is like
- Try not to judge them or criticize their care giving
- Acknowledge their care giving experience and knowledge as a caregiver
- Support them in their steps to improve their health and well-being
- Provide them with help
- Think of the caregiver as an individual with his or her own needs, hopes, and concerns.

For more information about support services for Caregivers, please contact your local area office on aging.

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