

SELF-CARE FOR CAREGIVERS

Caregiving is the act of providing direct care, support and assistance to family members or friends with physical or emotional needs. This care is different from the care that is given by professionals who are reimbursed for their services.

As a caregiver, you may experience stress. This stress can affect your mental health and lead to long-term health issues. It is important for you to be aware of your own needs and take advantage of any available caregiving resources. This article will discuss issues that give caregivers stress, strategies for stress relief, and tips and resources for caregivers.

What are some signs of caregiver stress?

Be aware of the signs of caregiver stress and depression. The symptoms include:

- Feeling sad, overwhelmed, or irritable
- Feeling tired all the time
- Having no interest, appetite or energy
- Sleeping more or less than usual.
- Gaining or losing weight
- Having trouble concentrating

Be sure to notify your doctor if you are experiencing these symptoms.

Factors associated with caregiver stress

Caregiver stress can be related to:

- the person being cared for
- you as the caregiver
- the caregiving situation

Depression and stress in caregivers can be caused by:

1. **Behavior problems of the person being cared for.** It can be difficult to deal with a person's aggression, violence, anger and volatility. Someone who cannot show enthusiasm and lack impulse control can be difficult to care for. Bizarre behavior, paranoia, social withdrawal, poor concentration, severe mood swings and repetition of words or actions are also symptoms that are challenging to manage. Sometimes, the person's mental functions decrease through the course of the day or they are unable to sleep. All of these situations can be stressful. Persons with dementia can be especially demanding in terms of the care that they need. Special knowledge and skills are necessary for their care.
2. **Illness and disabilities of the person being cared for.** Persons who are more impaired may require more care than those who are less impaired. Caregivers for those with dementia are especially at risk for mental health issues.
3. **The way you perceive the attitude of the person being cared for.** When you perceive the person that you are caring for as being unappreciative, manipulative or unreasonable, you may undergo more distress.
4. **Your age and gender.** Female caregivers are more likely to experience stress and depression than male caregivers. The effects of stress are worse as the caregiver gets older. Caregivers who do not have social support or have financial difficulties also experience more stress.

5. **How you feel about your caregiving responsibilities.** Caregivers who do not feel that they receive enough support from other family members feel more stress. Those who feel overwhelmed, guilty, out of control or constantly in demand also have higher stress levels.
6. **The relationship between you and the person being cared for.** Caregivers who had positive relationships with the person they are caring for in the past have lower levels of stress. This is true even if the care that they provide is more demanding. On the other hand, caregivers who had a poor relationship with the person they are caring for in the past may experience higher levels of stress.
7. **The length and amount of care that you provide.** The more time that you spend caring for the person and the more demanding the care that is needed, the more stress you are likely to feel.

The physical demands of caregiving can make mental health issues such as depression and anxiety worse. For example, not sleeping enough can make you feel more angry and incompetent, or helpless and frustrated. When you recognize signs of caregiver stress, it is important to seek help right away.

Caregivers of persons with dementia

Persons with dementia can be particularly challenging to care for. They require special skill sets and more attention. Persons with dementia may be aggressive and agitated. They can wander around during nighttime. It can also be difficult to communicate with them.

All of these factors can lead to stress and depression in the caregiver.

Family conflict and lack of social support are other factors that can increase caregiver stress. Family issues that are already present, as well as caregiving, can lead to family conflict. These issues can make the person's demand on the caregiver even greater. They can also get in the way of the support that the caregiver provides. As a caregiver, you must ask for assistance from other family members to maintain your mental health. Encouragement and appreciation can help decrease your burden and stress.

Strategies for stress relief

You can successfully fight stress and depression using several active coping strategies.

The most common coping strategies used by caregivers include:

- Prayer and meditation
- Talking with friends or relatives
- Exercise, including Tai Chi and Yoga
- Hobbies
- Professional counseling
- Support groups

Smoking, drinking, over-eating are examples of unhealthy coping strategies and should be avoided.

Additional tips for caregivers

1. Educate yourself about your family member's disease. Find out how the disease may affect behavior, pain, emotions, etc.
2. Think about how you will feel and what you will do after you are no longer a caregiver.
3. Find time to keep yourself healthy with nutritious meals, exercise and rest.
4. Look for help in performing your caregiver tasks. Some resources may be found in family, friends, neighbors, workplace, religious groups and Area Agency on Aging. There are also many resources available online.

5. Use your friends and family as a support network. Otherwise, look for a local support group for caregivers.
6. Reserve time to do something that you enjoy or need to get done.
7. Reward yourself by taking breaks.

Resources

The following websites include national and local programs that provide caregiver support:

Alzheimer's Association

<http://www.alz.org/care/>

Administration for Community Living

<https://www.acl.gov/programs/support-caregivers/national-family-caregiver-support-program>

Caregiver Action Network

<http://www.caregiveraction.org/>

Chinese language assistance available for the sites listed below

Alzheimer's Association

<http://www.alz.org/asian/overview.asp?nL=ZH&dL=ZH>

American Association of Retired Persons

<http://www.aarp.org/home-family/asian-community/>

Chinese Caregiver Assistance Program, Stanford University

<http://oafc.stanford.edu/projects/ccap.html>

On Lok Lifeways

<http://www.onlok.org/>

Self-Help for the Elderly

http://www.selfhelpelderly.org/services/social-services/caregiver_support.php