

# Caregiver Stress

**A**dvances in science, better nutrition and improvements in health care have allowed people to live to unprecedented ages. But this blessing of longevity has brought with it challenges that have stretched the demand for services of both professional and family caregivers. As Rosalyn Carter once said, "There are only four kinds of people in the world, those who have been caregivers, those who are currently caregivers, those who will be caregivers and those who will need caregivers." Today, more than 50 million people provide care for a loved one and fulfill multiple roles. Family caregivers are the foundation of long-term care nationwide, exceeding Medicaid long-term care spending in all states. So it should not be surprising that studies on caregivers report they are stressed and even clinically depressed.

Being a caregiver is a labor of love, but also physically and emotionally challenging. When our boys were seven and eleven, my grandmother came to live with us. She was paralyzed from the waist down and required a great deal of care. I welcomed the opportunity to be her caregiver as she had been mine and our sons. However, I had not anticipated what a drastic change it would be for the family. It required significant adjustments in our routines and reorganization of living space, so sometimes things got a little rocky. As with everything in this crazy world of duality, there are two sides to caregiving. One is fraught with frustration, upset, blame, worry and fear. The other is blessed with compassion, patience, forgiveness, trust and love.

Trying to manage someone else's care and neglecting your own needs can lead to caregiver stress and burn out. The most frequently reported unmet needs of caregivers are finding time for oneself, managing emotional and physical stress, and balancing work and family responsibilities.

The round-the-clock demands of caring for a person can negatively impact the health of the caregiver. They often don't have the time—or the energy—to take care of their own health needs, a situation that puts them at increased risk for chronic conditions. Caregivers experiencing extreme stress may even age prematurely. However, studies have shown that a moderate level of physical activity—done in 30-minute sessions in and around the home—may help caregivers safeguard their health. Pay attention to your diet. Fruits, vegetables, whole grains and proteins are the best choices to stay energized. Get enough sleep so that you wake up feeling rested. It is also important to get regular medical and



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## Health Talk

dental checkups to ensure your health does not deteriorate. Plan time in your day for things you enjoy. It is okay to ask for help from others. If someone offers to help, give them a specific task. Ask them to stay with your loved one while you take a nap or go out. Have them run an errand for you or ask them to bring a meal.

Staying connected with friends is another important stress reliever. Laughing with your friends over a cup of green tea can be just the pick-me-up you need to feel rejuvenated. Having fun, laughing, and focusing on something else helps you keep emotionally balanced and will boost your immune system. Talk to friends and family about your feelings, share experiences; bottled up emotions can harm your immune system and lead to illness. Join a support group or check into community services and organizations that can help with caregiving support by offering meals on wheels, caregiver training classes, transportation, friendly visitors and respite care, so that you can have a break.

Caregiving often comes with new responsibilities and unfamiliar tasks, for which most caregivers never receive training. Some of the new responsibilities may include making decisions that have to do with end-of-life caregiving. In the event that you are asked to make or help make decisions, it is important for you to talk about issues, including thoughts about potential life-prolonging treatments. Advance directives are tools that enable people to write down their preferences on a legal form and appoint someone to speak for them if they are no longer able. A living will, health care power of attorney, financial power of attorney, and plan for after care (funeral arrangements) can help ensure peace of mind for the ill person as well as the caregiver.

Life balance can be elusive when you are caring for a relative or friend. Adding caregiving duties to your already busy life takes over any free time you might have. Letting go of the concept that balance means perfection or always feeling in control is a good place to begin. Realize that you do not have to do everything perfectly. Take care of yourself and caregiving will be less stressful and much more rewarding. ↓

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