



Being a caregiver

Are you providing care for a loved one? If so, you're not alone — although it may sometimes feel that way. About 26 million Americans are looking after an ill or disabled relative or friend, and family members provide about 80% of all care received by older persons.

By the numbers

- 26 million Americans look after ill or disabled relatives.
- 80% of elder care is performed family members.

Caregiving is seldom easy. Yet, most caregivers struggle on in silence, internalizing the stress and pain they often feel. But there are ways to manage stress and keep it from overwhelming you.

A large part of caregiver stress comes from being overloaded. There may be many competing demands on your time, and these demands may not leave much, or any, time for doing the things that you enjoy. At the same time, you may feel the emotional drain of caring for someone whose condition may not improve. If you are holding down a job and raising a family at the same time, the stress can at times seem overwhelming.

Recognizing the signs of caregiver burnout

Some caregivers are reluctant to acknowledge the strain associated with their role, seeing this as an admission of failure. But acknowledging and recognizing stress is the first step toward reducing it. This acknowledgement is important, not just for the caregiver but for

everyone around him or her — the disabled relative, family, and coworkers. Here are some common signs of caregiver stress:

- anxiety
- depression
- sleeping and eating problems
- headaches
- susceptibility to illness
- anger
- loneliness
- guilt
- irritability or impatience
- withdrawal from friends and family

Seeking help

Knowing when to ask for help is a crucial skill that helps caregivers keep going. It may appear easier to do the work yourself, but you risk quickly burning yourself out. To avoid this, you need to tap into the human resources in your **family** and in your **community**.

continued

Key points

The most important thing to know about caregiving is that you don't need to do it alone. Getting support for your role as a caregiver is your first priority. Make sure you

- ask for help from other family members
- ask for help from your community
- ask for help from friends and neighbors

- share your struggles with managers, coworkers, and friends
- take care of yourself by taking breaks from caregiving
- take care of yourself by eating right and getting enough sleep

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Getting help from other family members

Often the bulk of caregiving duties fall on the shoulders of one or two family members. It need not be this way. Here are some tips for getting other family members more involved:

- **Hold family meetings.** It's important to keep all the family members informed on a regular basis about the care being provided, even relatives who have expressed little interest. These meetings can take place in person, on the phone, or by e-mail. You can even set up your own private electronic "mailing list" through services like Yahoo Groups (groups.yahoo.com).
- **Be specific in your requests for help.** Make a list of all the things that need to be done and ask family members to take responsibility — on an occasional basis at least — for certain tasks, such as picking up a prescription or doing laundry.
- **Don't let long-distance family members off the hook.** They can pitch in by doing jobs such as paying bills, recordkeeping, or managing legal and financial matters.
- **Show your appreciation.** You might do this through a note or a phone call. Such recognition will encourage family members to help out again.

Extend your support network

People need to feel useful. Just because friends or neighbors haven't volunteered already doesn't mean they don't want to help. Make a list of

all the people you know who may be able to lend a hand. Ask them for help with specific tasks on the basis of their strengths. Even teenagers may be able to assist with errands or chores.

Make contact with others

One of the most stress-inducing byproducts of caregiving is a feeling of isolation. Here are some strategies for reducing it:

- **Find someone you trust with whom you can share your up-and-down emotions.** All feelings are legitimate, even the upsetting ones of anger, guilt, or sadness. By bottling up these feelings, you risk having them spill out in destructive ways, such as anger at others or an inability to focus at work.
- **Explore counseling.** A professional individual or family counselor can help you cope with the complex and powerful emotions that caregiving evokes. A counselor or therapist can also help you find ways to balance your competing personal, work, and family demands.
- **Find a support group or start one of your own.** Joining a group whose members are struggling with issues similar to yours will reinforce the fact that you're not alone, and it will allow you to benefit from valuable resources and insights. Online support groups can be helpful, as well. (See the "Resources" section at the end of this fact sheet.)

Caregiving and work

Caregiving responsibilities can rarely be restricted to lunch hours. Some

caregivers try to conceal their care-taking role until it begins to affect their job performance or puts their employment in jeopardy. But there are ways to prevent this from happening.

- Inform your supervisors and coworkers of your caregiving duties.
- Investigate whether you can come in on an alternative schedule or work at home.
- Check to see whether your employer's benefits (such as a Dependent Care Assistance Plan) can help pay for eldercare costs.
- Explore the possibility of taking a family leave for emergencies.

You deserve a break

For your own mental health, it is imperative that you carve out time for yourself away from your caregiving role. Go to a movie, read a book, or have lunch with a friend. Taking extended time off may require a "respite care" service. In addition to family and friends, there are three main kinds of respite care.

Home care services — Workers come to your home to help with everything from cooking to bathing.

Adult daycare — The person being cared for takes part in supervised activities with other older adults.

A temporary stay in a long-term care facility — Many nursing homes are now offering short-term stays to provide caregivers some time for rest, relaxation, and rejuvenation.

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Safeguard Your Own Health

Stress can contribute to a variety of afflictions, and many caregivers run the risk of getting sick because they neglect their own health problems. Make sure you pay attention to your own needs.

- Eat properly.
- Get your needed hours of sleep.
- Exercise regularly.
- Practice relaxation techniques such as meditation.
- Set aside time for things you enjoy.

In short, the only way you can provide good care is if you take care of yourself.

Resources

Berman, Claire. *Caring for Yourself While Caring for Your Aging Parents: How to Help, How to Survive*. (Owl Books, 2001, 2nd ed., \$16)

Loverde, Joy. *The Complete Eldercare Planner: Where to Start, Which Questions to Ask, and How to Find Help*. (Times Books, 2000, 2nd ed., \$19.95)

Marcell, Jacqueline. *Elder Rage, or Take My Father... Please!: How to Survive Caring for Aging Parents*. (Impressive Press, 2001, 2nd ed., \$19.95)

McLeod, Beth Witrogen. *Caregiving: The Spiritual Journey of Love, Loss and Renewal*. (John Wiley and Sons, 1999, \$22.95)

Morris, Virginia, and Butler, Robert. *How to Care for Aging Parents*. (Workman Publishing, 1996, \$15.95)

AARP

1-800-424-3410
www.aarp.org/confacts/caregive/planning.html

Children of Aging Parents

1-800-227-7294
www.caps4caregivers.org

Eldercare Locator

1-800-677-1116
www.eldercare.gov

Family Caregiver Alliance

1-800-445-8106
www.caregiver.org

National Alliance for Caregiving

www.caregiving.org

National Caregiving Foundation

1-800-930-1357
www.caregivingfoundation.org

National Family Caregivers Association

1-800-896-3650
www.nfcacares.org

Online support groups

www.caregiving.com/support/html/group.htm

Well Spouse Foundation

1-800-838-0879
www.wellspouse.org

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