

Overview: Caregiving

Some people are caregivers by choice and make it their primary career. Many others are family caregivers. These caregivers typically have jobs and take on the added responsibility of caring for their loved ones. Caregivers have a higher risk of stress and depression. Caregivers should learn to recognize signs and symptoms of these risks and address them early on.

What is a caregiver?

A caregiver provides assistance to someone that is or has become dependent and needs ongoing help with daily tasks. A dependent person may include: a special needs child, an older or aging parent, a sick spouse or family member, or a disabled friend.

The Stages of Caregiving

Stage 1: When it becomes clear that you'll become a caregiver, the first thing to do is gather as much information as you can. Find out about community services and health programs. Also, learn about your loved one's finances, life and health insurance and Social Security information.

Stage 2: Line up help—whether family members, a nurse or home aide. Your life can quickly take a backseat to caregiving if you don't have support. It does no one any good if your job is at risk or your family life suffers. Your loved one should be included in decisions and his or her wishes respected. Consider costs, quality of care and your loved ones needs and wishes when looking for support.

Stage 3: Should your role as a caregiver go on, it can be very tiring. You'll likely feel many emotions—from anger to guilt to frustration. This is when you risk giving a lower quality of care and letting your own well-being suffer. Consider finding adult day care or respite care for your loved one. You should also take care of yourself by eating right, exercising and maintaining a social life.

Stage 4: Your role as a caregiver as you have known it eventually comes to a close. Your loved one may recover, need more specialized care, or, sadly, pass away. Despite the stresses of your caregiving role, you likely experienced the many positive things that come with such a close relationship. Grieving for the loss of a loved one and even your role as caregiver is natural.

Over 52 million caregivers provide care to someone age 18 and older who is ill or has been disabled.

(Source: Nov. 2012; National Alliance for Caregiving and AARP)

Finding balance

Those who balance work and caregiving may find it difficult at times to handle all of the demands they have. Finding balance can help caregivers maintain a happy and healthy lifestyle. First determine what can be done with the allotted schedule, versus the things that cannot be completed or are not a priority. Asking for help from others in the family is a great way to find balance. Most family members are willing to help out when someone needs care, but most caregivers don't want to ask for help as they feel it is a burden. Additional ways to find balance are:

- **Be realistic.** If you feel overwhelmed by some activities, learn to say no. Eliminate an activity that is not absolutely necessary. You may be taking on more responsibility than you can or should handle.
- **Meditate.** Having 10 to 20 minutes of quiet reflection every day may bring you relief from chronic stress as well as increase your ability to handle stress. Use the time to relax the best way you know how. If you don't enjoy meditating, pick up a book and read for a few minutes.
- **Enhance yourself.** Find time to exercise and eat right. Focusing on you will help relieve stress and help you be a better caregiver to others.
- **Spend time with a friend.** Remove yourself from any distractions and have lunch or grab a coffee with a friend.
- **Create a support network.** Having a support group of family and friends can help you deal with stressful situations and manage problems in a positive way.
- **Think positive.** If you are optimistic and think that things will work out, more often than not, they will. Thinking positive is a powerful tool.
- **Focus on rest.** Be sure to get enough rest. If you struggle with falling asleep, try to take time to unwind and relax. Exercise and taking time for you can help.
- **Laugh.** You might not realize that laughing can actually help lower stress. This is one of the most enjoyable options for letting go of tension. Find something that makes you laugh or enjoy a light hearted conversation with a friend.
- **Focus on you.** Take time to care for yourself. This is extremely important and often overlooked.
- **Use respite care.** Respite programs help to provide short-term and time-limited breaks for caregivers. Respite care has been known to help a caregiver achieve better health and overall well-being.

Issues that Caregivers Face

A number of studies have shown caregivers can face a decline in their own health and well-being. The most common issues include:

- Depression
- Sleep disorders
- Stress and anxiety
- Changes in overall health

Fast Facts

FAMILY CAREGIVERS

- 21% of households in the U.S are impacted by caregiving.³
- Unpaid caregivers provide an estimated 90% of long-term care.²
- 83% of caregivers are part of the caregivers family.¹
- The average caregiver is a 46 year old woman with some college experience.³
- Caregivers report difficulty finding time for one's self, managing emotional and physical stress, and balancing work and family.³
- 73% of caregivers said praying helps them cope with caregiving stress, 61% speak with or seek advice from friends or relatives.³
- 53% said their health had gotten worse due to caregiving.⁴

1. FCA, 2005: Family Caregiver Alliance, Fact Sheet: Selected Caregiver Statistics, 2005. Available: <http://www.caregiver.org>

2. IOM, 2008: Institute on Medicine, Retooling for an Aging America: Building the Health Care Workforce, April 2008, www.nap.edu

3. NAC, 2012: National Alliance for Caregiving/AARP, Caregiving in the U.S., 2012, http://assets.aarp.org/rgcenter/il/us_caregiving_1.pdf

4. NAC, 2006: National Alliance for Caregiving, Evercare Study of Caregivers in Decline, 2006, www.caregiving.org/

Depression

Caring for someone who is ill or disabled can be emotionally difficult. People who provide care typically make significant sacrifices to both their personal time and finances. Long-term caregiving can lead to an increase risk of depression. Feelings of frustration, sadness, and worry can have a negative impact on a person's emotional well-being. Caregivers can become depressed and feel helpless and lonely.

Depression can be treated and, with help, many people report improvement. A person who is providing care should be aware of the following symptoms of depression:

- Constant sadness
- Feeling helpless
- Loss of interest in activities
- Withdrawn and removed
- Moody and frustrated

Stress and anxiety

Being a caregiver can be stressful and overwhelming. It can cause the caregiver to feel anxious about the tasks required to provide care. There are many responsibilities associated to being a caregiver including; doctor appointments, coordinating treatment, daily living needs and other types of personal care.

Stress and anxiety can appear as physical symptoms such as: headaches, body aches, rapid heart rate, increased breathing and sweating and muscle tension.

Stress and anxiety can appear as emotional symptoms such as: anger, frustration, extreme emotional swings, and feelings of sadness or constant worrying.

Sleep disorders

Caring for others can have an impact on sleep. Those who care for others typically report difficulty sleeping. The constant worrying and stress of caring for a person who is ill or disabled can cause lack of sleep and lead to overall exhaustion and poor health. Sleep is extremely important for those who provide care to others.

Changes in health

Caregivers may find it difficult to take time to eat healthy and exercise. Always being on the go and having to care for someone else can cause a person to ignore their own health and can lead to increased weight gain or loss, heightened blood pressure, and body aches and soreness.

Caregivers are at a greater risk to develop heart disease and women providing care are more likely to report high blood pressure, diabetes and have higher levels of cholesterol due to overall poor health. Caregivers typically do not seek treatment for their own health due to the lack of available time. As a caregiver's health continues to decline, the overall care that is being provided may be impacted.

On average, caregivers spend between 20 and 40 hours per week providing care.¹



Next steps

Being a caregiver can be rewarding as well as challenging. It adds a tremendous amount of pressure, stress and responsibility to an individual and a family. Being empowered to seek help and recognize that you or someone you know may need assistance is courageous and commendable. There are a number of ways that you or someone you know can get additional assistance. Speaking to a counselor or a professional is a great way to determine and process the emotions that you or someone you know may be feeling.

Reaching out to talk with someone you know and can trust or a professional is a great way to start. Your Employee Assistance Program can help.

Caregiving is a tremendous responsibility that can also be very rewarding.



Employee Assistance Program
1-800-424-6015