

Caregiving: Rewarding, but Stressful

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Caregiving can have many rewards. For most caregivers, being there when a loved one needs you is a core value and something you wish to provide. But a shift in roles and emotions is almost certain. It is natural to feel angry, frustrated, exhausted, alone or sad. Caregiver stress—the emotional and physical stress of caregiving—is common. People who experience caregiver stress can be vulnerable to changes in their own health.

Risk factors for caregiver stress include: being female, having fewer years of formal

education, living with the person you are caring for, social isolation, having depression, financial difficulties, higher number of hours spent caregiving, lack of coping skills and difficulty solving problems, lack of choice in being a caregiver.

As a caregiver, you may be so focused on your loved one that you don't realize that your own health and well-being are suffering. **Watch for these signs of caregiver stress:** feeling overwhelmed or constantly worried; feeling tired most of the time; sleeping too much or too little; gaining or losing a lot of weight; becoming easily irritated or angry; losing interest in activities you used to enjoy; feeling sad; having frequent headaches, bodily pain or other physical problems; abusing alcohol or drugs, including prescription medications; too much stress, especially over a long time, which can harm your health. As a caregiver, you're more likely to experience symptoms of depression or anxiety. In addition, you may not get enough sleep or physical activity, or eat a balanced diet—which increases your risk of medical problems, such as heart disease and diabetes.

The emotional and physical demands involved with caregiving can strain even the most resilient person. That's why it's so important to take advantage of the many resources and tools available to help you provide care for your loved one. Remember, if you don't take care of yourself, you won't be able to care for anyone else.

Strategies to help manage caregiver stress:

- **Accept help.** Be prepared with a list of ways that others can help you, and let the helper choose what he or she would like to do. For instance, one person might be willing to take the person you care for on a walk/or sit with them a couple of times a week. Someone else might offer to pick up groceries or cook for you.
- **Focus on what you are able to provide.** It's normal to feel guilty sometimes, but understand that no one is a "perfect" caregiver. Believe that you are doing the best you can and making the best decisions you can at any given time.
- **Set realistic goals.** Break large tasks into smaller steps that you can do one at a time. Prioritize, make lists and establish a daily routine. Begin to say no to requests that are draining, such as hosting holiday meals.
- **Get connected.** Find out about caregiving resources in your community. Many communities have classes specifically about the disease your loved one is facing. Caregiving services such as transportation and meal delivery may be available.
- **Join a support group.** A support group can provide validation and encouragement, as well as problem-solving strategies for difficult situations. People in support groups understand what you may be going through. A support group can also be a good place to create meaningful friendships.
- **Seek social support.** Make an effort to stay well-connected with family and friends who can offer nonjudgmental emotional support. Set aside time each week for connecting, even if it's just a walk with a friend.
- **Set personal health goals.** For example, set a goal to establish a good sleep routine or to find time to be physically active on most days of the week. It's also crucial to fuel your body with healthy foods and plenty of water.

