

THE SYMPTOMS OF CAREGIVER STRESS



DEPRESSION IS A COMMON COMPLAINT OF STRESSED-OUT CAREGIVERS

Caregivers experience higher levels of mental and physical health problems than most people. While men and women tend to take on different roles in the caregiving process, both men and women suffer from much the same symptoms of stress.

DEPRESSION

Stress can bring on anything from a general feeling of temporary unhappiness at life, all the way to clinically diagnosable depression that requires treatment. It is one of the most common complaints among caregivers. Depression breaks the spirit and leaves caregivers unable to fulfill their responsibilities. The mental health impact is largely determined by the number of hours people are engaged in caregiving activities. One study, for example, found that middle-aged women who were engaged for 36 hours or more a week in the care of their spouse were 6 times more likely to suffer mental health consequences, and those engaged in caring for parents were twice as likely to suffer mental health consequences as a result of caregiving.

ANXIETY

Anxiety could arguably be a part of depression. It encompasses different emotions, however, which include feelings of worry, unease, nervousness and angst about what the future holds for both the caregiver and the one being cared for. It may even manifest itself as an inability to sleep. Caregivers may worry about their ability to adequately care for their loved ones. They may also worry about their own health, because they are likely to neglect their own needs. Taking care of someone else, especially those at the end of their lives, may cause caregivers to reflect on their own mortality. All of these symptoms are normal, yet caregivers should seek professional help, since constant anxiety can cause deeper and more serious problems if left untreated.

IRRITABILITY

When caregivers are overworked and exhausted, or feeling unappreciated, frustrated or powerless they may become moody, irritable, hostile or short-tempered, or just want to be left alone. However, it's unlikely that the caregiver has the luxury of being left alone to regain their emotional strength. Constant irritability can be bad for the caregiver and the person being cared for, since caregiving requires a Herculean amount of patience. The caregiver may begin to experience physical problems such as headaches and poor digestion, and may begin to snap at others, including the loved one, other members of the family, doctors, or service providers.

DENIAL

Denial, an element in the process of grief, is also a sign of caregiver stress. The caregiver may deny how ill the individual being cared for actually is, or may believe they will get better. They may deny that more professional help is needed when they can no longer care for the loved one adequately.

SOCIAL WITHDRAWAL

Social withdrawal is also a sign of depression, but is a little easier to recognize than some of the other symptoms. Caregivers who once enjoyed social interaction may begin to avoid it. Invitations to family dinners or neighborhood barbecues

may be left unanswered or refused, and even posts on social media like Facebook may diminish as the caregiver pulls more and more inside themselves. A number of factors may contribute to this: social interactions require effort, and the caregiver may simply be too exhausted; friends and family may stop visiting; and the person being cared for may behave unpredictably and make social interactions awkward.

HEALTH PROBLEMS

Researchers have found that 1 in 3 caregivers provide care for others while being in poor health themselves. 25% of female caregivers suffer health problems as a direct result of their caregiving, and they are twice as likely to suffer from coronary heart disease as their non-caregiving counterparts.

TIPS FOR OVERCOMING CAREGIVER STRESS



BUILDING A SUPPORT NETWORK IS A GREAT WAY TO REDUCE CAREGIVER STRESS

One of the biggest sources of stress is the inability to escape caregiving responsibilities. Although many caregivers attempt to go it alone, they can be better caregivers if they utilize all available support services. There are several resources available that may offer help, and caregivers should not feel reluctant to ask for it even if it seems uncomfortable at first.

If anyone, such as friends and family, has mentioned they will help the caregiver when needed, those names should be put on a list and utilized from time to time. Needs should be stated very specifically. "I need you to watch mom for 2 hours on Tuesday, what time slot is convenient for you?" is much more likely to get a positive response than "I need someone to come watch mom next week," because the need and the time commitment is clearly defined.

Calling on fellow church members may yield results, but don't discount people of other denominations. Call first on people of the church or group to which the loved one belongs, but certain church groups look for ways to show support to people of their community in general, believing it to be a reflection on God. Services can range from mowing the lawn to doing grocery shopping.

Home health care is another option. People will come into the home and provide whatever services the caregiver needs, such as cooking, light housekeeping, and even respite care. Although this kind of care usually costs money, costs may vary according to the services needed. There are even some free programs out there. Military personnel can sometimes enroll in programs such as the Exceptional Family Member Program, which offers free respite care for a special-needs family member. Some caregiver support groups provide services on a sliding fee scale.

Adult day care is also an option. Nationally, adult day care ranges from \$40 to \$100 per day, averaging about \$61, according to the National Adult Day Services Association. Some Medicare or private insurance plans cover adult day care under certain circumstances. The one being cared for may also get a great benefit from this as well, since many day care centers provide social activities, meals, and health-related services.

For caregivers who are married and/or have children, stress develops when there doesn't seem to be enough time or attention to give to everyone who seems to need it. The most effective way to get family buy-in is to seek some consensus. When everyone feels like they are being listened to, the caregiver will likely find more cooperation. Husbands and wives who cooperate form a much more effective support team for an aging parent or special-needs child. Also, remember

that not every request from the person being cared for needs to be made the number one priority.



EXERCISE LIKE YOGA CAN RELEASE ENDORPHINS AND REDUCE THE EFFECTS OF STRESS

It may seem counter intuitive to say that caregivers need to engage in exercise when they are taxed to the limit as it is and may suffer from exhaustion. However exercise releases endorphins that can help make caregivers feel better. This doesn't mean joining a gym – caregivers have precious little time to engage in traveling back and forth – but they may be able to fit in a brisk 10-minute walk while the one being cared for is napping. Even when providing care, caregivers can sneak in a little exercise by gardening or following along with a short exercise video. Equipment such as treadmills or weights may allow the caregivers to get in some exercise, and maybe even encourage the ones being cared for to get some exercise too if they are physically able.

Along with getting a little exercise, caregivers should be sure they eat well, because this helps boost endurance and energy. They should try to avoid large, calorie-rich meals that leave them feeling sluggish and sleepy. Instead, eating many small meals of high protein foods along with fruits and vegetables is a better way to sustain energy throughout the day. Drinking plenty of water not only

keeps the caregiver hydrated but can flush out toxins, helping the caregiver avoid illness.

If the caregiving job is a 24-hour, 7-days-a-week occupation, sleep may be difficult to come by, yet it is essential for the stamina and thinking ability needed when facing with the challenges of caregiving. Because someone being cared for may still need assistance during the night, such as help going to the bathroom or the administration of medication, a caregiver's sleep may be interrupted. There are things caregivers can do to help them go to sleep quickly and feel more relaxed upon awakening.



GETTING ENOUGH SLEEP IS A GREAT WAY TO COMBAT ANXIETY

The first key to a good night's sleep is creating at least a half hour of downtime before bed. The primary caregiver may be able to enlist other family members to take over then so the caregiver can unwind. Developing a sleep routine helps; going to bed and getting up at the same time everyday keeps everything on schedule. Be sure bedrooms are conducive to sleep – the room should be dark, cool, and quiet. Avoiding alcohol and caffeine encourages more restful sleep. Caregivers should not discount the power nap – if the one being cared for is napping, caregivers should consider napping at the same time.

It's essential that caregivers care for their emotional, spiritual selves as well, since caring for a loved one requires a great deal of inner strength and can be

emotionally taxing. Caregivers tend to ignore their own emotions (or worse, let them build up), which only adds to their feelings of frustration and stress. Some caregivers find relief by talking to a trusted friend, a counselor or a spiritual advisor. Others find peace by participating in religious activities and prayer. Those who aren't religious may still find calm in meditation or breathing exercises designed to sooth the mind and spirit. Visualizing a calm, peaceful place is helpful to some caregivers.

Connecting with other people is extremely important. Most caregivers feel socially isolated and disconnected with the world as their tasks become all-consuming. If possible, the caregiver should arrange to get out for a day or even just an evening with friends. If that kind of connection isn't possible, joining a support group may help because caregivers can connect with people who are in similar situations. Support groups don't have to meet in person. There are online support groups where fellow caregivers can exchange information and offer positive and encouraging words. Social media sites may be helpful to caregivers who want to keep up with friends but don't have the luxury of getting out very often.

Humor has an amazing ability to alleviate stress. Watching a funny movie, telling funny stories or reminiscing about happy times, reading the comics, or just finding humor in everyday ridiculousness actually changes brain chemistry. Many caregivers operate in "stress response," a state where high levels of stress hormones enter the bloodstream. Laughter subdues the stress response, allowing for a more relaxed feeling. Long term benefits include increased immunity to illness, pain relief, and better ability to cope with the demands at hand.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

While stressful, the job of caregiving has many rewards. Studies show that because of caregivers, many elderly or special-needs people would require institutionalization, either in a nursing home or special care facility. Because the person being cared for is usually home when there is a caregiver present, families have the opportunity to enjoy the loved one, to share family history, to renew bonds and to gain from their wisdom.

Rewards aside, caregiving is still a stressful and demanding job. Learning to mitigate the stress helps caregivers maintain the vigor, attitude and stamina required to take on this role. The demands of the job are unlikely to change, so utilizing stress-reduction techniques keeps the stress from becoming overwhelming and unmanageable.

Caregivers must learn that taking care of themselves allows them to take care of others, and by doing so they can continue to care for, love, learn from and enjoy the people in their charge.