

Caregiving: A Fact Sheet to Share

Caregiving can be a gift. It can also be a burden. For most people, it is a combination and a balancing act. The work of accompanying a sick or needy person, especially a loved one, can take its toll on the body, mind, emotions and spirit. No matter how much caregivers love the people for whom they care, and no matter how much they may love the job, stress is a common outcome of the physically, emotionally and mentally demanding work that caregiving entails.

Indicators of Caregiving Stress

- Health problems
- Fatigue
- Guilt
- Insomnia
- Pain
- Loss of concentration
- Irritability
- Anger
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Withdrawal
- Denial

Caregivers are at higher than normal risk for mental health disorders, and should be prepared with a plan of self-care and stress management early in the caregiving process. It is common for caregivers to become more involved without noticing how much time and energy is gradually being given to the job. When the stress becomes overwhelming, gradually or suddenly, caregivers can feel burned-out, exhausted and “at wits-end.” Unfortunately, this is how caregivers can unknowingly or unintentionally become abusive to the person in their care. Elder abuse is very rarely deliberate; unfortunately it commonly happens as a result of caregiver burnout. A caregiver self-care plan might include red flags for stress symptoms and steps to take to keep stress at a relative minimum. It might also include support and resource information to employ when needs are greater.

Questions Caregivers Can Ask Themselves

- What are reasonable and realistic limitations I have in regard to my ability to provide care?
- How can I make sure that I give myself time each day to take care of my own personal needs and responsibilities?
- Do I know all I can about the illness, limitations and supports of the person I care for so that my expectations are realistic and I know how to respond to their needs and behaviors?

- Do I feel comfortable with the personal care needs (bathing, toileting, etc) of the person I care for? If not, how can I handle that situation?
- Who can I talk to about the feelings I have about caregiving and know that I will be supported and encouraged? Who can help me problem solve when I feel stuck?
- How will I know when it's time to get more help for the work that I do or the feelings that I have?

Self-Care Strategies for a Self-Care Plan

Nutrition

- Eat “real” food that is vitamin rich, and eat more high fiber foods.
- Avoid processed or “junk” food, as well as too much sugar, caffeine, saturated fat or salt.
- Remember meals and plan ahead for hungry times.
- Drink plenty of water (the sense of thirst diminishes in older age).

Exercise

- Those who exercise regularly have more energy, sleep better, feel healthier, and happier.
- Exercise wards off stress, depression, anxiety and muscle tension.
- Begin slowly and pace yourself. Pick an activity you enjoy and talk to your doctor to plan the best exercise plan for your health and goals.

Self-Help Activities

- Take slow and deep breaths.
- Replace negative thinking with positive thinking. Forgive yourself and others. Practice being more accepting of limits and realities.
- Engage in a personal spiritual practice like meditation or journaling.
- Start a new hobby, take a class or learn a new skill.
- Create a network of support. Call on friends, neighbors and family to stay connected and receive support for hard work and difficult feelings.

Seek Professional Help

- Talk to your physician or health care provider when stress persists.
- Talk to a psychiatrist, psychologist, social worker, nurse, pastoral counselor, a mental health or stress clinic, a family support agency or any other support system that can help you manage your work, health and feelings.
- Consult a professional about the best behavior and communication approaches to use according to the illness of the person for whom you care.

More information can be found on the website www.mdaging.org

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