



Patient Information

Coping with Caregiver Stress

If you take care of a chronically ill or disabled loved one, you're not alone. About one in four households in the United States provides care for an older family member, an adult child, or a friend.

Now that you've added caregiving to an already busy schedule, your total workload has increased—and may have even doubled. Caregiving responsibilities can account for 12 to 20 hours each week, and at times, your loved one may need 24-hour care. Other family members who are used to getting more of your attention may feel neglected, which can lead to increased tensions and conflicts within the household. You may feel that your career is suffering as you find it necessary to take time off from work or reduce your hours. And extra medical or other expenses related to caregiving may put a strain on your finances. Together, these factors can add up to high levels of stress.

Are my reactions normal?

It's completely natural for you to experience guilt, anger, or frustration and to have mixed feelings about your new responsibilities or the person you're caring for. Your usual routine has been disrupted and many aspects of your life have changed. Perhaps your loved one has moved into your home, reducing levels of privacy and changing family dynamics. In addition, caring for a loved one can heighten any diffi-

culties that may have always been a part of your relationship.

Although these feelings are normal, they can be damaging if they're allowed to build up. Physical signs of excessive caregiver stress, or "burnout," include headaches, low energy level, chronic back pain or other muscle tension, heartburn or digestive problems, sleep problems, and appetite changes. Emotional signs include feeling sad or moody, withdrawing from friends and family, losing interest in hobbies and other activities you used to enjoy, and feeling anger toward the person you're caring for.

If you notice any of these signs, talk with your doctor. Describe any physical symptoms and discuss your feelings honestly. As a health care provider, your doctor understands the difficulties of caregiving, and he or she can suggest coping strategies and refer you to other professionals and support groups who can provide further assistance.

How can I cope?

Caregiver stress may feel inevitable, but there are healthy ways to manage it. First, it's important to realize that it's okay to have negative feelings sometimes. Recognize and accept your limitations and give yourself a break. When you feel you're being pulled in too many directions, try to look at the situation realistically and don't expect to be able to do everything for everyone.

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No matter how busy you are, make sure you schedule some relaxation time for yourself. Whether it's meeting a friend for a movie once a week or going for a daily walk through the park by yourself, taking a regular break from the demands of caregiving goes a long way toward releasing stress.

Keeping your emotions bottled up inside can lead to physical illness. So find someone with whom you can talk freely about your feelings—such as a sympathetic coworker, friend, or family member. You also may find it helpful to discuss your experiences with a neutral party, such as your doctor, a professional counselor, or a caregiver support group.

Don't forget to take care of yourself physically, too. By practicing good health habits—eating a low fat diet that's rich in fruits, vegetables, and whole grains; limiting alcohol and tobacco intake; exercising regularly; getting enough sleep; and keeping up with regular medical checkups—you'll feel stronger, more energetic, and better able to tackle the extra workload.

You may find that your many tasks seem less daunting if you organize them ahead of time and enlist help from those around you. For example, try making a list of all the chores that need to be accomplished over the next week. If family members or friends ask you whether you need anything, say "yes," and be specific about how they can help. Perhaps your neighbor can pick up your weekly groceries. Or, if your brother tells you he's available on Tuesdays, you might ask him to take your mother to her therapy appointment every other week.

If it's feasible for you to hire help, there are many professionals who can assist you in your caregiving duties. A housekeeper, personal care worker, or companion can help out with chores around the house or even provide personal care for your loved one. In addition, you might want to look into adult day care programs for your loved one, which can give you a few free hours during the day.

Where can I find help?

Your local Area Agency on Aging (AAA) can help you finance certain aspects of caregiving, find home health aids, arrange for transportation, and complete chores or home repair. To find an agency close to you, call (800) 677-1116.

To find caregiver support groups, visit the National Family Caregiver's Association web site (www.nfcacares.org). You can also find groups through hospitals, adult day care centers, your local AAA, or your doctor.

If you work, your employer may be able to help as well. Often, larger companies have employee assistance professionals to help you find resources to cope with caregiving. They also may be able to provide services such as flextime, telecommuting options, counseling, and support groups. Speak with your personnel department about your specific needs and see if they can work with you.

If you're a military service member caring for a loved one, check out the Military Assistance Program's Elder Page (www.defenselink.mil/mapcentral/elder.html), which contains links to federal, military, and general resources. ●

