

Caring for the Caregiver

Family caregivers aren't alone. An estimated 44 million Americans regularly care for an elderly relative or friend, with estimates that as much as 75 percent or more of elder care is provided by informal caregivers.

But many caregivers shoulder the responsibility as if they were alone, often not asking for help. As a consequence, they suffer stress that takes a toll on their own physical, mental and emotional health. They may feel guilty for wanting help, for instance, feeling as if they were letting down a parent who has always been there for them. But taking on all the responsibility, along with parenting, career and other obligations, can turn into an unhealthy situation for both the caregiver and the person being cared for.

The Family Caregiver Alliance reports that 40 to 70 percent of family caregivers show clinically significant symptoms of depression. The Center on Aging Society adds that one in 10 family caregivers reports that their responsibilities have caused their physical health to worsen.

The stress of caregiving is so significant that a 1999 study, published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, reported that elderly spouses who care for a loved one were 63 percent more likely to die in the next four years than those who didn't provide care.

However, caring for a family member or friend can be a very rewarding, uplifting experience – if done with support. To be most effective, caregivers need regular breaks, or respites, from their caregiving role. A respite can just be a day away with friends or an afternoon of personal errands ... to going on vacation.

Caregivers can look to a variety of sources to find support:

- Other family members and friends, who can share the responsibility
- Professional in-home senior care providers, who can fill in as needed
- Churches and other volunteer organizations
- Nursing homes or adult day care centers
- Senior centers and area agencies on aging
- Web sites that offer caregivers advice, forums and links to resources

Often, family and friends want to help. They just don't know how. Caregivers can make it easy on them—and themselves—by always having in mind a list of assignments, like preparing meals, picking up a few things at the grocery store, going on a walk with the senior or staying with him or her from time to time.

Leading medical societies have recognized the health risks associated with caregiving and have created practice guidelines to identify and serve those at risk. The American Academy of Family Physicians (www.aafp.org), for instance, has published "A Practical Guide to Caring for Caregivers." It provides screening tools for assessing the degree of a caregiver's stress. The guide suggests, "If the caregiver does not receive respite regularly, physicians should give them permission to ask for help and assist them in finding sources for assistance."

Caregivers can protect their own health and well-being – and be of greater service to those they care for – by practicing the following:

- Exercise—make sure to incorporate it in your schedule for added energy
- Get plenty of sleep—eight hours is recommended for most people
- Eat regular, well-balanced meals
- Maintain contact with friends and stay involved in hobbies and social activities
- Join a support group to reinforce the idea that you are not alone
- Visit your doctor regularly

- **Take time off for yourself, and relax**

(sidebar)

Finding Caregiver Support on the Web

Family caregivers have a wealth of online resources to find support and advice. Here are a few examples:

- www.eldercare.gov – a service of the U.S. Administration on Aging that locates local Area Agencies on Aging, along with other resources for seniors and caregivers
- www.strengthforcaring.com – Johnson and Johnson's resource center for caregivers
- <http://nac.lotsahelpinghands.com> – a site that allows family and friends to share and coordinate caregiving tasks online. The site is sponsored by the National Alliance for Caregiving.
- www.familycaregiving101.org – a project of the National Family Caregiving Association and the National Alliance for Caregiving, which operates under the theme, "Family Caregiving: It's not all up to you."