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Caregiver Stress

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Who is a caregiver?

A caregiver is someone who gives basic care to a person who has a chronic medical condition. A chronic condition is an illness that lasts for a long time or doesn't go away. Some examples of chronic conditions are cancer, effects of stroke, multiple sclerosis, arthritis, diabetes, and Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia. The caregiver helps the person with tasks such as preparing and eating food, taking medicine, bathing, and dressing.

Why is caregiving so hard?

Caring for a loved one who is seriously ill is never easy. It may be hard for you to juggle the different parts of your life, such as work, chores, caring for children, and caring for the person who is sick. You may feel like you don't have any free time.

Caregiving is also hard because you often see many changes in your loved one, such as the following:

- The person you're caring for may not know you anymore.
- He or she may be too ill to talk or follow simple plans.
- He or she may have behavior problems, like yelling, hitting, or wandering away from home. This may be especially true if the person you're caring for suffers from dementia.

You may have a hard time thinking of the person in the same way that you did before he or she became ill.

Is it normal to have so many different feelings about being a caregiver?

Yes. It's normal for you to have many different feelings about your role as a caregiver. At times, you may feel scared, sad, lonely, or unappreciated. You may feel angry and frustrated. You may feel guilty or feel that life isn't fair. All of these feelings are normal.

It's not normal for these feelings to last for a long time or to disrupt your life. Because being a caregiver is so hard, some doctors think of caregivers as "hidden patients." Studies show that caregivers are much more likely than noncaregivers to suffer from stress overload, [depression](#), and other [health problems](#). Learn to tell whether your feelings are normal, or are signs of stress (see below).

How can I tell if caregiving is putting too much stress on me?

If caregiving is putting too much stress on you, you may have one or more of the physical or emotional symptoms of stress overload or depression listed in the box below.

Signs of stress overload

- Anxiety
- Excessive anger toward the person you care for, your family, or yourself
- Extreme tiredness
- Health problems (such as heartburn, headaches, or catching a series of colds or flu)
- Irritability
- Sleep problems (sleeping too much or not enough)
- Social withdrawal

Signs of depression

- Change in appetite; unintended weight loss or gain
- Crying easily or for no reason
- Feeling sad, hopeless, or helpless
- Feeling slowed down or feeling restless and irritable
- Feeling worthless or guilty
- Headaches, backaches, or digestive problems
- Loss of interest in sex
- No interest or pleasure in things you used to enjoy
- Sleep problems (sleeping too much or not enough)
- Thoughts about death or suicide
- Trouble recalling things, concentrating or making decisions

What should I do if I'm feeling overwhelmed and stressed?

Talk to your family doctor. Don't be ashamed or embarrassed about how you're feeling. Tell your doctor about all of your symptoms. He or she can recommend coping methods, support groups, counseling, or medicine to help you feel better.

Talk to your loved one and your family. You may feel that you shouldn't burden people with your feelings because you're not the one who is sick. However, talking about the illness and how you feel can help relieve stress. If your loved one is unable to participate, be sure to talk about how you are feeling with other family members or friends who can provide support.

Take care of your health. Studies show that caregivers are more likely to suffer from a number of other health problems, in addition to stress and depression. To help manage stress and minimize your risk for health problems, avoid alcohol and tobacco use, eat right, exercise, and see your family doctor for preventive care. Read "[Caregiver Health and Wellness](#)" for more information.

Educate yourself about your loved one's medical condition. Find out all you can about the condition your loved one has, the treatment he or she is going through, and its side effects. Being informed can give you a sense of control. Your loved one's doctor, support groups, the Internet, and libraries are good resources for more information.

Stay organized. Caregiving is often a full-time job, but you may be doing it on top of your other responsibilities, such as a paid job or taking care of your children. Make a schedule with your family.

This will help all of you stay organized and will help you manage the demands on your time. Don't forget to schedule time for things you enjoy, such as visiting with friends or going out to dinner or a movie.

Look for help in your community. Community services can include meal delivery, transportation, legal or financial counseling, and home health care services such as physical therapy or nursing. You can also ask at your church or synagogue for services or volunteers who can help you. You can also ask for help from support organizations (see "Other Organizations") or join an online community.

Join a support group. Support groups give you the opportunity to share your feelings and experiences with people who are going through similar situations. Your doctor can suggest ways to find a support group, or you can contact some of the organizations listed below (see information under "Other Organizations").

Seek counseling. Recognizing that you need help takes strength and courage. Sometimes it's helpful to talk with a counselor about how you're feeling. Your family doctor can refer you to a doctor or therapist who specializes in the kind of counseling that's best for you.

Other Organizations

