

Caregiver Stress – The Next Epidemic?

By Gina M. Barry, Esq.

“I’m so stressed out!” Certainly, all of us have made this proclamation. Take a moment now to think of how you felt at that time, and you will get a glimpse into the daily lives of our nation’s family caregivers. A caregiver is anyone who helps another person in need with daily tasks, such as bathing, cooking, eating, taking medications, dressing, using the bathroom, shopping, house cleaning, and the like. Approximately 44 million Americans (21% of the adult population) provide unpaid care. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services estimates that informal caregivers provide 80% of the long-term care in the United States. As our population continues to age, demands for care will steadily increase and caregiver stress, unless recognized and remedied, will become even more pervasive.

Caregiver stress is real, and its impact severe. Providing care is physically and emotionally demanding, especially when the care recipient requires 24-hour care. A spousal caregiver over the age of 65 has a greatly increased risk of dying over spouses in the same age group

who are not providing care. Very often, the caregiving spouse neglects his or her own health issues, which are usually compounded by stress, because he or she is too busy addressing the care needs of the spouse.

Obvious physical signs of stress include, but certainly are not limited to, fatigue, high blood pressure, irregular heart beat or palpitations, chest pain, back, shoulder or neck pain, frequent headaches, digestive problems and hair loss. Caregivers experiencing sustained stress may also exhibit a weakened immune system. Emotional signs of stress are usually not easily observed. These signs include a gamut of feelings, including but not limited to, anxiety, depression, irritability, frustration, lack of control or isolation. A stressed caregiver may also report or exhibit mood swings, memory problems, and/or general unhappiness, including expressing resentment toward the care recipient and family members who do not contribute.

Most often, caregivers have difficulty asking for help. Either they do not recognize the stress,

or they feel hopeless. Caregivers will also often express feelings of extreme guilt associated with asking someone else to provide care in their stead, even if only for a short period of time. In this regard, it is very important for the family and friends of caregivers to encourage regular respite for the caregiver and to ensure that the caregiver takes these regular breaks from caregiving. Respite can be provided in home or at a facility and may take the form of day care or involve a short stay at the facility.

There are also many other ways that caregivers can reduce their stress. Caregivers should learn about programs that are available to assist with caregiving and how to qualify for such assistance. There are a variety of programs available, including meal delivery, home health care, day care, transportation and the like. An elder law attorney can help determine for which programs the elder would qualify and/or the steps to be taken to ensure eligibility for benefits in the future. Caregivers should also objectively look at the care they are providing and determine whether it may be done more

efficiently. For example, it would be preferable to purchase a new washing machine and dryer than to continue to use a public laundromat. Caregivers should also prioritize tasks, use lists and establish a daily routine, while avoiding taking on additional projects, such as hosting a holiday meal.

Some caregivers find individual counseling helpful. In addition, there are many different support groups in existence that are great for developing friendships with other caregivers and to learn improved ways to provide care or cope with difficulties. Moreover, caregivers should be sure to include some fun in their weekly schedule. Taking in a movie, going for a walk or meeting a friend for coffee and conversation

can be delightful distractions. Caregivers should also be sure to get regular exercise, which provides stress relief and has a positive effect on mood. In addition, caregivers should plan healthy meals and do their best to adhere to a sleep schedule that ensures they will receive adequate ongoing rest.

When a caregiver is cognizant of the signs of caregiver stress and actively works to combat this stress, the caregiver will be better able to provide care and for a much longer period of time. Whenever possible, family and friends should also be sure to support the caregiver and to be on the lookout for any signs of caregiver stress. With the continued graying of our nation and the anticipated increase in caregiving by family members, if

we do not adhere to these practices, our nation's next disabling epidemic will likely be caregiver stress.

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