

Caring for the Caregiver: A Real Dilemma Families Face in an Age of Living Longer

By Julie A. Dialessi-Lafley, Esq

FAST FACTS

- A 2005 government-financed study reported that more than 1 million children in our nation take care of sick or disabled parents or relatives.
- The AARP says that about 65 million people give care each year. These caregivers can be friends, family members, spouses, or neighbors. In some instances, more than one relative helps out in some families, but most caregivers go it alone.
- Clients often report that caregiving is a truly rewarding experience and an opportunity to give back to parents or family members. It is sometimes a chance for old wounds to be healed and relationships to improve.
- Caregivers must get help when needed, be alert for problems, take time out for themselves, and be prepared on all levels.

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These caregivers take on the responsibilities of shopping, feeding, dressing, medicating, and even changing adult diapers. Because older generations are now living longer, they often are unable to care for themselves independently and children or even older parents and family members are taking on the exhausting responsibility with demands sometimes more than a full-time job. While caregivers often feel inadequately

prepared for the job, overwhelmed, grief stricken, and scared, they often report that caregiving is a truly rewarding experience and an opportunity to give back to parents or family members. It is also an opportunity to heal old wounds and improve relationships.

However, caregiving is demanding and time-consuming. It may even raise the risk of stress-related disorders. The work of caregiving often goes well beyond what a person can do, and caregivers are encouraged to seek help. It is not a sign of weakness or failure but according to the National Family Caregivers Association "Asking for help is a sign of your love and caring, not of weakness and shame. It is much more than a one-person job. The following tips are drawn from professional, government, and charitable groups: the American Society on Aging, the Administration on Aging, the Family Caregiver Alliance, Children of Aging Parents, and the NFCA; they can be instrumental in helping the caregiver succeed.

Get Help

Caregivers are encouraged to ask family and friends for help. Family conferences are essential to keeping less-engaged family members informed; these conferences are also a way to discuss suggestions and air disagreements. There are also networks where families with similar problems can be consulted about how they handle problems. If possible, the person who is ill or disabled should be included in all decision-making. Also, learning about the disease or disability of the ill relative can help caregivers better assist them. Specialists can be sought for information and guidance. Local, state, and national resources can help with transportation, nutrition, or

day care.

Help can range from a call to a support hotline, to just having someone listen, or to speaking with a counselor. A professional can help the caregiver understand his or her situation without being judgmental. Caregivers are encouraged to talk with religious advisers and attend support groups. Groups can explain a loved one's condition, ease tension, and provide a sense of what's important. The Internet provides a bounty of resources with everything from the AARP, which is an advocacy group with publications on aging, including recent legislation, to the following:¹

- **Administration on Aging:** access to statistics, fact sheets, and booklets.²
- **Children of Aging Parents:** information on caregiving and referrals to

About the Author



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support groups, care managers, and other resources.³

- **Eldercare Locator:** a service of the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging with local services, including home-delivered meals, transportation, legal assistance, housing options, recreation and social activities, adult day care, senior center programs, and abuse prevention.⁴
- **Family Caregiver Alliance:** covers medical, social, public policy, and caregiving issues linked to brain impairments.⁵
- **National Council on the Aging:** information and advocacy.⁶
- **National Family Caregivers Association:** dedicated to aiding caregivers through education, research, and support.⁷
- **National Institute on Aging:** conducts and supports research, training, and information on aging.⁸
- **Older Women's League:** focuses on issues unique to women as they age and offers fact sheets on caregiving.⁹
- **Well Spouse Foundation:** offers support to people caring for a sick spouse who need emotional care themselves.¹⁰

Watch for Problems

Mental and physical signs of caregiver stress include but are not be limited to the following: anger or fear; a tendency to overreact; feeling depressed, isolated, or overburdened; thoughts of guilt, shame, or inadequacy; taking on more than can be handled; headaches; digestive upsets; weight loss or gain; trouble sleeping; and fatigue or illness. It is important to pay attention for these signs as they put the caregiver at risk. The increase in elder abuse and neglect may be related to the pressures on caregivers.

Take Time Out

It is important for caregivers to be good to themselves and to the person to whom care is given. Caregivers must take time from caregiving and not neglect personal and professional needs. The following list represents simple ways to recharge:

- Get lots of rest and exercise.
- Enjoy relaxing music.
- Eat nutritious meals.
- Visit with friends.
- Plan leisure activities.
- Do deep breathing exercises.

- Take time to read a magazine.
- Do not abuse alcohol or drugs.
- Do not overeat.
- Keep a sense of humor.
- Write your feelings in a journal.
- Do spiritual meditation.
- Set limits on what you can and cannot do.
- Realize you are doing the best you can.
- Join a support group.
- Use community resources for help.

Be Prepared

Caregivers can prepare themselves by being organized, educated on the issues, and aware of the downside of providing care, such as stress and frustration. They also should look to their home to ensure that it is ready for the unique issues surrounding a person with medical needs as well as look to make sure they are prepared financially and legally for this responsibility. Time away from employment may add financial pressure just as working and providing adequate care can add to the burdens. Legal issues of estate planning, liability issues, and rights of the patient should be addressed.

The most important thing for caregivers to remember is that they must take care of themselves before they can care for anyone else. By taking steps to help themselves, they can continue the rewarding work they are doing. ■

Web References

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