

Caregiver stress: Tips for taking care of yourself

By Mayo Clinic staff

Caring for a loved one can be a strain on even the most resilient individuals. If you're a caregiver, take steps to preserve your own health and well-being.

When you hear the word "caregiver" you probably picture someone caring for a parent with Alzheimer's disease. But a caregiver is anyone who provides help to another person in need, whether that's an ill spouse or partner, a disabled child, or an aging relative. Indeed, more than 65 million Americans provide care to a loved one.

If you're among them, you know that taking care of someone who needs your assistance can be very rewarding. But it can also exact a high toll, and caregiver stress is common. Caregiver stress is the emotional and physical strain of caregiving. Individuals who experience the most caregiver stress are the most vulnerable to a decline in their own health.

Many caregivers fall into the trap of believing that they have to do everything by themselves. Don't make that mistake. Take advantage of the many resources and tools available. Remember, if you don't take care of yourself you won't be able to care for anyone else.

Signs of caregiver stress

As a caregiver, you may be so focused on your loved one that you don't realize that your own health and well-being are suffering. Watch for these signs of caregiver stress:

- Feeling tired most of the time
- Feeling overwhelmed and irritable
- Sleeping too much or too little
- Gaining or losing a lot of weight
- Losing interest in activities you used to enjoy

Too much stress, especially over a long time, can harm your health. As a caregiver, you're more likely to experience symptoms of depression or anxiety. In addition, you may not get enough physical activity or eat a balanced diet, which only increases your risk of medical problems, such as heart disease and diabetes.

Tips for dealing with caregiver stress

The emotional and physical demands involved with caregiving can strain even the most capable person. That's why it's so important to take advantage of available help and support. These tips have helped others deal with caregiver stress:

- **Accept help.** Be prepared with a list of ways that others can help you and let the helper choose what he or she would like to do. For instance, one person might be happy to take the person you care for on a walk a couple of times a week. Someone else might offer to pick up groceries for you.
- **Don't give in to guilt.** Feeling guilty is normal, but understand that no one is a "perfect" caregiver. You're doing the best you can at any given time. Your house does not have to be perfect, and no one will care if you eat leftovers three days in a row. And you don't have to feel guilty about asking for help.
- **Get informed.** Organizations such as the Red Cross and the Alzheimer's Association offer classes on caregiving, and local hospitals may have classes specifically about the disease your loved one is facing.
- **Join a support group.** A support group can be a great source for encouragement and advice from others in similar situations. It can also be a good place to make new friends.
- **Stay connected.** Make an effort to stay in touch with family and friends. Set aside time each week for socializing, even if it's just a walk with a friend. Whenever possible, make plans that get you out of the house.
- **Commit to staying healthy.** Find time to be physically active on most days of the week, and don't neglect your need for a good night's sleep. It's also crucial to eat a healthy diet.
- **See your doctor.** Get recommended immunizations and screenings. Make sure to tell your doctor that you're a caregiver. Don't hesitate to mention any concerns or symptoms you have.

Respite care

It may be hard to imagine leaving your loved one in someone else's care, but taking a break is one of the best things you can do for yourself as well as the person you're caring for. Most communities have some type of respite care available, such as:

- **Adult care centers.** Many adult care centers are located in churches or community centers. Some care centers provide care for both elderly adults and young children, and the two groups may spend time together.
- **Day hospitals.** These hospitals provide medical care during the day. In the evening, your loved one returns home.
- **In-home respite.** Health care aids come to your home to provide companionship, nursing services or both.
- **Short-term nursing homes.** Some assisted living homes, memory care facilities and nursing homes accept people needing care for short stays while caregivers are away.

The caregiver who works outside the home

Two-thirds of caregivers work outside of the home. Juggling work responsibilities and caregiving isn't easy, and employed caregivers experience high levels of caregiver stress. If you're in this situation, try these tips for balancing your work and personal responsibilities:

- Learn to delegate. Share your work — and home — responsibilities with others.
- Ask your human resources department about resources your company offers, such as support lines or referral services. Then make use of these assistance programs.
- Keep an open line of communication with your supervisor and co-workers.
- Ask your loved one's doctor to send a letter to your company explaining the seriousness of your loved one's condition.

You aren't alone

If you're like many caregivers, you have a hard time asking for help. Unfortunately, this attitude can lead to feeling isolated, frustrated and even depressed. Rather than struggling on your own, take advantage of local resources for caregivers. To get started, contact your local Area Agency on Aging (AAA) to learn about services in your community. You can find your local AAA online or in the government section of your telephone directory.

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