

CAREGIVING – Caring for others and yourself

The caregiver's role requires a lot of time and energy. But there can be great satisfaction and joy in keeping loved ones at home and making them a part of family life. The key is keeping a balance between giving to another and caring for oneself.

The role of caregiver can also place many strains on your physical, psychological, and social self, and in some instances, lead to caregiver burnout. Caregiver burnout is a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion that may be accompanied by a change in attitude -- from positive and caring to negative and unconcerned. Burnout can occur when caregivers don't get the help they need, or if they try to do more than they are able -- either physically or financially. Many caregivers also feel guilty if they spend time on themselves rather than on their ill or elderly loved ones. Caregivers who are "burned out" may experience fatigue, stress, anxiety, and depression.

Signs and Symptoms of Caregiver Burnout:

The symptoms of caregiver burnout are similar to the symptoms of stress and depression. They include:

- Withdrawal from friends, family, and other loved ones
- Loss of interest in activities previously enjoyed
- Feeling blue, irritable, hopeless, and helpless
- Changes in appetite, weight, or both
- Changes in sleep patterns
- Getting sick more often
- Feelings of wanting to hurt yourself or the person for whom you are caring
- Emotional and physical exhaustion
- Irritability

Causes of Caregiver Burnout:

Caregivers often are so busy caring for others that they tend to neglect their own emotional, physical, and spiritual health. The demands on a caregiver's body, mind, and emotions can easily seem overwhelming, leading to fatigue and hopelessness -- and, ultimately, burnout. Other factors that can lead to caregiver burnout include:

- **Role confusion** -- Many people are confused when thrust into the role of caregiver. It can be difficult for a person to separate her role as caregiver from her role as spouse, lover, child, friend, etc.
- **Unrealistic expectations** -- Many caregivers expect their involvement to have a positive effect on the health and happiness of the patient. This may be unrealistic for patients suffering from a progressive disease, such as Parkinson's or Alzheimer's.
- **Lack of control** -- Many caregivers become frustrated by a lack of money, resources, and skills to effectively plan, manage, and organize their loved one's care.

- **Unreasonable demands** -- Some caregivers place unreasonable burdens upon themselves, in part because they see providing care as their exclusive responsibility. Some family members such as siblings, adult children, or the patient himself/herself may place unreasonable demands on the caregiver. These individuals also may disregard their own responsibilities and place burdens on the person identified as primary caregiver.
- **Other factors** -- Many caregivers cannot recognize when they are suffering burnout and eventually get to the point where they cannot function effectively. They may even become sick themselves.

To avoid caregiver burnout, here are some tips:

- Accept your own limitations and those of the person for whom you are caring.
- Ask other people to help you. Tell them exactly what you and the person being cared for need. Sometimes people are afraid of intruding or don't know how to offer help. If help is offered but not what you need, be honest and say so. Suggest something they can do that would help you.
- Accept help from friends and family. Schedule times when you can leave the home to relax or take care of your own affairs. Tell people what you need them to do, rather than wait for them to offer. For example, you might ask someone to sit with the person being cared for, and watch TV or read to him or her. Even if others don't do things just the way you would, as long as they do a good job, let them do it.
- Join a caregivers' support group. Talking with others and sharing problems and solutions really helps. You are not alone in your concerns.
- Try keeping a journal. Write down your thoughts, frustrations, and anger. Journaling can be a good way to relieve stress. Also, look for positive experiences in caregiving. Your journal notes, particularly the positive things you find, can be a great source of comfort and joy later.
- It may help to look at caregiving as a way to give back many years of loving care by a parent or spouse. Know that you will not have to look back with regrets because you did all you could while the person was still alive.
- Don't forget to include children to help in the care. They can do chores for you, play cards or games with the person being cared for, or just talk with him or her.
- Have regular family meetings for sharing feelings and information. If possible, include the person being cared for in these talks. Use this time to make plans and to improve communication and cooperation among family members.

What if I have burnout?

If you are already suffering from stress and depression, seek medical attention. Stress and depression are treatable disorders. If you want to prevent burnout, consider turning to the following resources for help with your caregiving:

- **Home health services** -- These agencies provide home health aids and nurses for short-term care, if your loved one is acutely ill. Some agencies provide short-term respite care.
- **Adult day care** -- These programs offer a place for seniors to socialize, engage in a variety of activities, and receive needed medical care and other services.
- **Nursing homes or assisted living facilities** -- These institutions sometimes offer short-term respite stays to provide caregivers a break from their caregiving responsibilities.

- **Private care aides** -- These are professionals who specialize in assessing current needs and coordinating care and services.
- **Caregiver support services** -- These include support groups and other programs that can help caregivers recharge their batteries, meet others coping with similar issues, find more information, and locate additional resources.
- **Agencies for Aging** -- Contact your local agencies for aging. For a list of available resources and more information, please visit: <http://www.crncc.ca/links/index.html>
- **National organizations** – Look in a phone directory or search online for local agencies or chapters of national organizations that are dedicated to assisting people with particular illnesses, such as Parkinson’s disease or stroke. Such organizations can provide resources and information about subjects including respite care and support groups. A great place to start is the Public Health of Canada website for Aging & Seniors: <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/seniors-aines/index-eng.php>

For further information or to book an appointment, please contact:

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