

The Stress of Family Caregiving: Your Health May Be at Risk

Tricia O'Brien

You have heard it before: If you are a family caregiver, you are at a greater health risk than your loved one. That's because by devoting yourself to the needs of someone else, you tend to neglect your own. You may not recognize, or you may ignore, the signs of illness, exhaustion, or depression that you are experiencing. But science has now proven what family caregiver advocates have talked about anecdotally for years: Providing care to someone you love — whether full-time, part-time, or long distance — takes a huge toll, both physically and emotionally.

When was the last time you stopped to think about yourself? "Caregivers often don't see themselves as being in a difficult situation," says Richard Schulz, Ph.D., a professor of psychiatry at the University of Pittsburgh who has studied the health effects of caregiving. "They know they are stressed, but they don't recognize the link between caregiving stresses and what they experience." Chances are, however, that your health is suffering from the stress you face.

A whole body of research now demonstrates the correlation between caregiving, stress, and poor health. In fact, caregivers reported chronic conditions at nearly twice the rate of non-caregivers (45 percent versus 24 percent), according to the Commonwealth Fund Biennial Health Insurance Survey.¹ Yet millions of family caregivers lack health insurance coverage and go without needed medical care.² Data from the National Center for



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Health Statistics cites that caregivers average just four doctor visits per year versus seven for their non-caregiver counterparts. You likely also suffer economic hardships from missing work or leaving your job to look after a spouse, parent, or other loved one, which adds to your stress load.

Are You at Risk?

It is now recognized that the stress of caregiving results in any number of long-term health effects for the family caregiver. These include:

Infectious diseases: Stress causes a cascade of physiological changes that weaken our immune system and, consequently, our overall health. Scientists at Ohio State University and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill specifically studied how stress impacts the immune systems of elderly caregivers by charting the levels of a substance called IL-6 (a protein of the cytokine family). Levels of IL-6 rise as an individual ages, and elevated levels hinder how our immune

system functions. The researchers found that the stress of caregiving caused IL-6 levels to increase four times as quickly in elderly caregivers as in the non-caregiving participants who were under less strain. This translates to a higher occurrence of infections and illnesses, putting caregivers at a greater risk for everything from colds and influenza to chronic diseases like heart disease, diabetes, and cancer.³

Depression: Family caregivers suffer from the symptoms of this condition at more than twice the rate of the general population.⁴ However, many of those caregivers with the most severe cases of depression don't recognize the typical symptoms of the condition in themselves, believing instead that their fatigue or loss of energy, irritability or agitation, and difficulty sleeping or concentrating are just part of being a family caregiver. Therefore, they don't seek help. Depressive symptoms are debilitating, and the disease itself is a risk factor for the chronic conditions noted above.

Sleep deprivation: A host of studies demonstrate that sleep deprivation is rampant in caregivers. In one such study, family caregivers who had a high level of responsibilities had a 51 percent incidence of sleeplessness.⁵ A lack of shut-eye can impair your ability to concentrate and perform at your job. New research is accumulating to show that sleep deprivation heightens your risk of a variety of major illnesses, heart disease, and obesity.

Premature aging: It's not uncommon to hear, "This stress is taking years off my life." But now research

led by Elissa Epel, M.D., at the University of California at San Francisco proves exactly how this happens on a cellular level. In a small study of mothers caring for their chronically ill children, Epel found that chronic stress accelerates the effects of aging by actually shortening cell life. It leads to weakened muscles, skin wrinkles, and even organ failure. The study noted that this type of severe stress can take as many as 10 years off a person's life.⁶

Higher mortality rate: Research led by Dr. Schulz found that elderly caregiving spouses who had experienced strain had a 63 percent higher risk of death compared to study par-

ticipants whose spouses did not need care. The study, which appeared in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, also found that one-third of stressed caregivers who had a severe chronic disease died within the study's four-year follow-up period.⁷

What Do These Studies Mean To You?

These findings mean that the cumulative effects of the stress of family caregiving are no laughing matter. They mean that all family caregivers really do need to start doing some things to reduce their stress or they — and their loved ones — are going to be in more difficult situations than they already are. Whatever you do, don't dismiss your feelings as "just stress." Dr. Schulz explains: "Self-care is very important, and there are a wide range of preventive health behaviors that caregivers tend to neglect. These include getting exercise, eating right, and having medical checkups on a regular basis."

Self-care, of course, is easier said than done. The last thing most family caregivers want is to walk into another doctor's office. Although we all know that we should get exercise, sometimes it feels as if there isn't even one extra ounce of energy left. So what's a family caregiver to do?

Step one is to remind yourself constantly that self-care is a necessity, not a luxury. Sooner or later you will start to believe it, and begin to make room for some healthful activities, reach out for help to lessen your load, or both. In the meantime, stay in touch with friends and family

members. Tell them what's going on in your life. Stress-reduction techniques like deep breathing can be done at intervals during the day. And don't forget humor. It really can help you cope. Pick up the phone and call that friend who always knows how to make you laugh, or carve out a half-hour for a silly television program.

Try to work in some time for exercise as well: It is an incredible stress-reduction tool, and research has found that caregivers who exercise regularly have less depression, anxiety, anger, stress, and lower blood pressure than caregivers who don't.⁸ You don't have to go to a gym to get good exercise. You can power walk around the house for 10 minutes. Don't seem to have the time or energy for 10 minutes? Start with five. The point is to believe that you really must do some things that are helpful and healthful or you will not be able to do anything at all.

This past November, NFCA launched ***The Caring Every Day Campaign*** with this underlying message: Believe in yourself. Protect your health. Reach out for help. The Campaign encourages family caregivers to take these three steps every day to make life easier and to improve the care you provide.

For more information on how you can care for yourself, go to www.thefamilycaregiver.org. Remember, the best way to ensure that you will continue to be there for your loved one is to take care of yourself. ■

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It Doesn't Go With The Territory

In case you believe that your physical symptoms are just part and parcel of your day-to-day caregiving, consider the following excerpt from a letter received from an NFCA member:

"Shortly after my husband died, I was rushed to the hospital, practically at death's door myself. It turns out that my body was almost completely depleted of potassium. When the doctors asked why I didn't realize how tired I was getting, I told them that I did realize it, but since I was working and taking care of my husband, I assumed that the tiredness just came with the territory."

— *Former family caregiver, AZ*

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