

Caregiver Stress Not to be Ignored

By Wesley E. Wright and Molly Dear Abshire, as published in the Houston Chronicle Senior Living Section on November 16, 2011.

According to federal government statistics, more than 44 million Americans or 21 percent of our adult population provide unpaid care to elderly or disabled loved ones. Thirteen percent of caregivers are 65 or older. As the population ages, more individuals are taking on the responsibilities of caregiving.

Caregivers can include adults caring for other relatives, spouses caring for their husband or wife, parents with disabled children, or even children caring for disabled parents. The caregiver's role entails everything from less formal care such as checking in with a loved one to assistance with everyday activities such as bathing and dressing.

The more detailed the care becomes, the more issues caregivers are faced with. Many may end up going to work late, leaving work early, or opting for reduced hours. The setup can take a financial toll on the caregiver as well as cause potential burnout and mental stress. These issues can complicate the quality of care and also cause health problems for the caregiver.

Caregiver stress, the emotional and physical strain of care giving, is a real and pertinent issue. The stress can lead to frustration and anger as well as constant guilt to provide better care for the loved one. The caregiver may become lonely because he or she had to cut down on a social life. Furthermore, the sheer exhaustion from care giving can cause health issues, such as depression, anxiety, body pains, obesity, and other long term medical issues.

Many of these issues can be mitigated through pre-planning. For example, elderly in need of help from their adult children can work to form an arrangement before the care giving is actually needed. The aging member could work out financial arrangements as well as divide the responsibilities amongst various family members so not to burden one individual.

Sometimes, pre-planning is just not an option. In that case, caregivers must be mindful of their own health and well-being. Signs of caregiver stress include:

- Feeling overwhelmed
- Sleeping too much or too little
- Gaining or losing weight
- Frequent headaches, bodily pain, or other physical problems
- Exhaustion
- Becoming easily frustrated or angered
- Constantly worrying
- Loss of interest in activities that used to be enjoyable
- Depression
- Abuse of alcohol or drugs

There are ways to manage caregiver stress before it becomes out of hand. There are many resources provided by doctors, nursing facilities, and organizations, such as the Alzheimer's Association, that will provide resources to manage stress and create a more loving environment for the elderly. Support groups can also provide much needed advice and sympathetic ear for caregivers.

Many assisted living facilities offer respite stay to provide the caregiver a much needed break. Many businesses offer services, such as transportation, meal delivery, home modification, home health assistance, and legal and financial counseling, that can relieve the caregiver of time consuming tasks or mitigate worries.

Even then, it is important for a caregiver to realize when it is time for an elderly loved one to enter facility care. Facility care can offer medical attention and knowledge that a caregiver may not be able to. Caregivers need to be cognizant of when it is time for a loved one to move into a facility for more focused care.

A caregiver must be cognizant of his or her own health and well-being in order to provide the utmost care. Caregiver stress is not to be ignored and can be dealt with through proactive measures. If you or a loved one may find themselves in this situation, be sure to obtain the help and advice you need.