



COPING WITH CAREGIVING

Take Care of Yourself While Caring for Others

It can be a labor of love, and sometimes a job of necessity. A total of about 43 million U.S. adults provide unpaid care for someone with a serious health condition each year. These often-unsung heroes provide hours of assistance to others. Yet the stress and strain of caregiving can take a toll on their own health.

Many of us will end up becoming a caregiver at some point in our lives. Chances are we'll be helping out older family members who can't fully care for themselves. Such caregiving can include everyday tasks, such as helping with meals, schedules, and bathing and dressing. It can also include managing medicines, doctor visits,

health insurance, and money. Caregivers often give emotional support as well.

People who provide unpaid care for an elderly, ill, or disabled family member or friend in the home are called informal caregivers. Most are middle-aged. Roughly two-thirds are women. Nearly half of informal caregivers assist someone who's age 75 or older. As the elderly population continues to grow nationwide, so will the need for informal caregivers.

Studies have shown that some people can thrive when caring for others. Caregiving may help to strengthen connections to a loved

one. Some find joy or fulfillment in looking after others. But for many, the strain of caregiving can become overwhelming. Friends and family often take on the caregiving role without any training. They're expected to meet many complex demands without much help. Most care-givers hold down a full-time job in addition to the hours of unpaid help they give to someone else.

Informal caregivers, for example, may be less likely to fill a needed prescription for themselves or get a screening test for breast cancer.

Studies have linked informal caregiving to a variety of long-term health problems. Caregivers

are more likely to have heart disease, cancer, diabetes, arthritis, and excess weight. Caregivers are also at risk for depression or anxiety. And they're more likely to have problems with memory and paying attention.

Caregivers may face different challenges and risks depending on the health of the person they're caring for. Taking care of loved ones with cancer or dementia can be especially demanding. Research suggests that these caregivers bear greater levels of physical and mental burdens than caregivers of the frail elderly or people with diabetes.

Dementia can also create unique challenges to caregivers. The health care costs alone can take an enormous toll. One recent study found that out-of-pocket spending for families of dementia patients during the last 5 years of life averaged \$61,522, which was 81% higher than for older people who died from other causes.

Research has found that caregivers for people with dementia have particularly high levels of potentially harmful stress hormones. Caregivers and care recipients often struggle with the problems related to dementia, such as agitation, aggression, trouble sleeping, wandering, and confusion. These caregivers spend more days sick with an infectious disease, have a weaker immune response to the flu vaccine, and have slower wound healing.

One major successful and expanding effort to help ease caregiver stress is known as REACH (Resources for Enhancing Alzheimer's Caregiver Health). The REACH program is now being more widely employed. It's been adapted for use in free community-based programs, such as in local Area Agencies on Aging. It's also being used by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and by the Indian Health Service, in collaboration with the Administration for Community Living.

SELF-CARE FOR CAREGIVERS

- **Get organized.** Make to-do lists, and set a daily routine.
- **Ask for help.** Make a list of ways others can help. For instance, someone might pick up groceries or sit with the person while you do errands.
- **Take breaks each day, and spend time with your friends.**
- **Keep up with your hobbies and interests.**
- **Join a caregiver's support group.** Meeting other caregivers may give you a chance to exchange stories and ideas.
- **Eat healthy foods, and exercise as often as you can.**
- **See your doctor regularly.** Be sure to tell your health care provider that you're a caregiver, and mention if you have symptoms of depression or sickness.
- **Build your skills.** Some hospitals offer classes on how to care for someone with an injury or illness. To find these classes, ask your doctor.

