

If You're A Caregiver, Take Care

By Clement Manor



If you're helping with the care of a family member or friend, chances are high your own health may be at risk. Providing care for someone with a chronic illness, injury, disability or who is coping with aging can take a toll on the caregiver emotionally and physically. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Service's Office on Women's Health says that women caregivers are especially at risk for the harmful health effects of caregiver stress.

Caregiving takes on many forms and can range from helping with simple tasks of daily living such as:

- Getting groceries
- Paying bills

- Housework
- Laundry
- Meal preparation
- Showering, help with grooming
- Managing medications
- Scheduling and providing transportation to doctor appointments
- Hospital visits
- Overseeing paid caregivers in the home

It might also include researching services, advocacy and family communication. Sometimes these duties compound personal responsibilities at work and at home and can have financial repercussions too.

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Whether it's temporary or long-term, caregiver duties result in stress and increased likelihood for depression and anxiety. Your personal time for physical and social activity, and sleep can get squeezed along with your own balanced meals – all of which can increase risks for heart disease and diabetes.

IS YOUR STRESS OFF THE CHARTS?

Caregiving responsibilities can creep up slowly so you might not even be aware of the strain you're under. Mayo Clinic offers signs of caregiver stress that can be used to help assess where you fall on the continuum.

Emotional indicators include feeling overwhelmed, constantly worrying, more sadness than usual and a loss of interest in things you used to enjoy. You might also find yourself more easily irritated or angry more frequently.

Physical symptoms that can serve as warning signs that your stress levels are dangerously high include:

- Often feeling tired
- Getting too much or not enough sleep
- Weight changes
- Frequent headaches

- Bodily pain or other physical problems
- Increased use of alcohol or drugs, including prescription medications

HOW TO STAY HEALTHY

The Family Caregiver Alliance says identifying yourself as a caregiver is an important step in defining your role and protecting your health. It's a way of putting your oxygen mask on first so that you can be in the best position to provide care for your loved one. Learning about your loved one's condition and planning realistically for what you can and can't do will help ensure your needs don't get overlooked.

- Fundamental needs like sleep, exercise and good nutrition take top priority.
- Talk to your doctor if you're having trouble falling or staying asleep.
- Consider a meal service, grocery delivery and cleaning services not just for your loved one, but for yourself too.
- And remember to keep moving. Get outside – even if it's for a walk around the block.

Asking for and accepting help from others is also critical to keeping your stress manageable. Many mobile apps can help you locate and schedule

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services as well as organize your role by managing medication information, scheduling appointments, tracking symptoms, keeping notes on providers and insurance, making lists of to-do's and communicating with others on the caregiving team.

GET SUPPORT

Many conflicting feelings can surface even if you're choosing to be a caregiver out of love and concern. It's normal to feel frustration, impatience, guilt, grief and even ambivalence while providing care. Sometimes the feelings can intensify and alternate so much you feel like you're on a roller coaster.

Online caregiving communities can be a great way to connect with other caregivers. But Clement Manor Laurie Nowak, Adult Day Center Manager and support group facilitator says that face-to-face sharing with other caregivers can validate your experience and provide relief in a more personal way. "Hearing the ups and downs of caregiving from others who are in the same situation helps alleviate the stress that can come along with caregiving," Halbur said. "Caregiver support groups

provide a comfortable setting to let off steam, find humor in difficult situations and share ideas about what works," she added.

By getting the support you need, and making your own health a priority, you'll be in the best position to care for you and your loved one.

To find out more about caregiver support groups at Clement Manor call **(414) 546-7367**.

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The Caregiver's Pledge

One way to safeguard your health while caregiving is to take the Family Caregiver Alliance's pledge.

I will understand that I can't care for anyone else if I don't also care for myself.

I will remember that the only person I can change is myself. I cannot change my loved one who is ill, nor my family members.

I will find opportunities to laugh, daily.

I will get away from my caregiving duties on a regular basis, even if it is just to walk around the block.

I will visit a support group, either online or in person in my community, so that I know that I am not alone.

I will learn as much as I can about my loved one's illness so I can better care for him or her with understanding.

I will say "yes" when people offer to help.

I will use community resources to help make my caregiving duties easier.

I will find something I really like to do and make sure I find time to do it on a regular basis.

I will remember that I am loved and appreciated, even when my loved one can't tell me that.