



MARYLAND COALITION ON MENTAL HEALTH & AGING

711 West 40th Street ♦ Suite 460 ♦ Baltimore, Maryland 21211 ♦ (410) 235-1178 ♦ FAX (410) 235-1180

Caregiving: A Fact Sheet to Share

Caregiving can be a gift. It can also be a burden. For most people, it is a combination and a balancing act. The work of accompanying a sick or needy person, especially a loved one, can take its toll on the body, mind, emotions and spirit. No matter how much caregivers love the people for whom they care, and no matter how much they may love the job, stress is a common outcome of the physically, emotionally and mentally demanding work that caregiving entails.

It is very important that caregivers monitor their levels of stress. Caregivers must take care to prevent caregiving from damaging personal health, social supports, mental health and personal responsibilities.

The following are indicators of caregiving stress:

- ✓ Health problems
- ✓ Fatigue
- ✓ Guilt
- ✓ Insomnia
- ✓ Pain
- ✓ Loss of concentration
- ✓ Irritability
- ✓ Anger
- ✓ Depression
- ✓ Anxiety
- ✓ Withdrawal
- ✓ Denial

Caregivers are at higher than normal risk for mental health disorders, and should be prepared with a plan of self-care and stress management early in the caregiving process. It is common for caregivers to become more involved without noticing how much time and energy is gradually being given to the job. When the symptoms of stress compound, gradually (or perhaps suddenly), caregivers can feel burned-out, exhausted and “at wits-end.” Unfortunately, this is how caregivers can unknowingly or unintentionally become abusive to the person in their care. Elder abuse is very rarely planned; unfortunately it commonly happens as a result of caregiver burnout. A caregiver self-care plan might include red flags for stress symptoms and steps to take to keep stress at a relative minimum. It might also include support and resource information to employ when needs are greater.

Some questions caregivers can ask themselves:

- What are reasonable and realistic limitations I have with regard to my physical ability to provide care?
- How can I make sure that I give myself time each day to take care of my own personal needs and responsibilities?
- Do I know all I can about the illness, limitations and supports of the person I care for so that my expectations are realistic and I know how to respond to their needs and behaviors?
- Do I feel comfortable with the personal care needs (bathing, toileting, etc) of the person I care for? If not, how can I handle that situation?
- Who can I talk to about the feelings I have about caregiving and know that I will be supported and encouraged? Who can help me problem solve when I feel stuck?
- How will I know when it's time to get more help for the work that I do or the feelings I have?

The following are self-care strategies that one can put into a self-care plan:

Nutrition

- Reduce intake of refined sugar, caffeine, saturated fat, salt, and junk.
- Eat “real” food (not highly processed or “junk” food).

- Consume more vitamin rich, high fiber foods.
- Remember meals.
- Plan ahead for hungry times.
- Drink plenty of water (the sense of thirst diminishes in older age).

Exercise

- People who exercise regularly have more energy and better moods. They sleep better and feel healthier
- Exercise results in the release of biochemicals that ward off stress, depression, anxiety and muscle tension.
- Start with slowly with new activities and consult a doctor for the best exercise plan for your health status and goals.

Self-help activities

- Take slow and deep breaths.
- Replace negative thinking with positive thinking.
- Forgive (yourself as well as others) & practice being more accepting of limits and realities.
- Cultivate a personal spiritual practice i.e. meditation.
- Engage in a hobby, take a class, or learn a new skill.
- Journal.
- Cultivate a network of support - call on friends, neighbors and family to remain connected and to receive support for hard work and difficult feelings.

Seek professional help

- Consult your physician or health care provider when stress is lasting.
- Consult a psychiatrist, psychologist, social worker, pastoral counselor, community mental health clinic, nurse, stress clinic, family support agency – any of the many supports that are available to help you manage your work, your health and your feelings.
- Consult a professional about the best behavior and communication approaches to use according to the illness of the person for whom you care.

There are many support groups available to caregivers. Contact your local Area Agency on Aging to find out about support groups near you.

Further information on mental health can be found on the website www.mdaging.org or contact Kim Burton at 410-235-1178 x 210.