



## 8 Ways to Ease the Stress of Caregiving

*Approximately 52 million people in the United States care for a sick or disabled adult, according to the Family Caregiver Alliance. However, despite that high number, people underestimate how difficult the experience can be, says Amy Stern, a licensed clinical social worker at New York-Presbyterian Hospital's Irving Sherwood Wright Center on Aging. "They usually have a strong emotional tie to the person, so they don't see at first how complicated it's going to get," Stern says. On the other hand, many don't anticipate the satisfaction they'll get from caring for a loved one, she adds.*

### A Difficult Job

The Family Caregiver Alliance defines a caregiver as "anyone who provides assistance to someone else who is, in some degree, incapacitated and needs help." The association says the estimated 52 million caregivers are unpaid individuals who provide such care; it estimates that 59 percent to 75 percent are female. Moreover, studies show that female caregivers handle the most difficult tasks, such as bathing, toileting, and dressing, and are more likely to suffer from the stress of caregiving.

Stress can lead to myriad mental and physical problems, from headaches to upset stomachs and muscle aches. Chronic stress can also cause difficulty sleeping, upset normal appetite, and lead to depression and anxiety disorders.

A report published in the winter 2007 issue of *Progress in Cardiovascular Nursing* found that up to 90 percent of caregivers studied had sleep disturbances due to their roles. Another study in the August 2006 *Journal of Palliative Medicine* found that, among family members caring for patients with terminal cancer, the percentage of caregivers with a high level of psychological distress ranged from 41 to 62 percent, compared to 19.2 percent in the general population.

### A Matter of Perspective

The caregiver's outlook also can affect his or her levels of stress and anxiety. A study in the June 13, 2007 *Journal of Pain and Symptom Management* examined the responses of 739 caregivers and found that caregivers' self-esteem and stress were "strong predictors" of the caregivers' quality of life. It also found that male caregivers were more likely than female caregivers to view the experience as boosting their self esteem (positive).

"It is very common for people to experience at least some level of caregiver stress, but how much stress they experience depends on many factors," Stern says. These factors include the nature of the care recipient's illness, the extent of the caregiver's support system, the quality of the relationship prior to the onset of the caregiving role, and financial resources, among others. Stern recommends the tips on the next page to help caregivers maintain their own physical, mental and emotional health.

## Tips to Reduce Anxiety and Stave off Mental and Physical Problems Associated with Caregiving.

- 1. Give yourself credit.** Whether it's taking five minutes at night to recount all you did that day or whispering positive affirmations whenever you feel overwhelmed, it's important to recognize your accomplishments.
- 2. Maintain your physical health.** Stern says some caregivers actually skip their own doctor's appointments, reasoning that their caregiving duties come first. But staying healthy by eating right, exercising and taking care of routine medical matters actually helps you cope better.
- 3. Take a break.** Some caregivers must be told to leave the house every day for 20 minutes; others will know to take a break whenever they need it. Either way, schedule time away from the caregiver role *every day*.
- 4. Keep up your social network.** Make time to be with your spouse, have dinner out with friends, or take in a movie with your siblings or kids.
- 5. Treat yourself.** Indulge by reading a book at the park or getting a massage, it's OK to splurge. "It has to be given the same amount of importance as everything else," Stern says.
- 6. Get support.** Joining a support group or working with a professional counselor provides not only an outlet for your concerns, fears and frustrations, but also a source for accessing information.
- 7. Seek professional assistance.** More and more resources are available to help caregivers; services range from visiting nurse care to day care for disabled adults to overnight respite care.
- 8. Educate yourself.** Knowing everything about your loved one's condition and having a doctor with whom you feel comfortable helps reduce the unknowns that can cause anxiety and fear.

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## Where to Get Help

**AARP**, Phone: 888-687-2277, Web site: [www.aarp.org/families/caregiving](http://www.aarp.org/families/caregiving)

**Administration on Aging, National Family Caregiver Support Program (NFCSP)**,  
Phone: 202-619-0724, Web site: [www.aoa.gov/prof/aoaprogram/caregiver/caregiver.asp](http://www.aoa.gov/prof/aoaprogram/caregiver/caregiver.asp)

**Alzheimer's Association**, Phone: 800-272-3900, Website: [www.alz.org](http://www.alz.org)

**Family Caregiver Alliance**, National Center on Caregiving, Phone: 800-445-8106, Web site: [www.caregiver.org](http://www.caregiver.org)

**National Alliance for Caregiving**, Web site: [www.caregiving.org](http://www.caregiving.org)