

# Caregivers Need Care Too

- The Role of the Caregiver
- Taking Care of Yourself
- Finding the Help You Need



## Caring for Someone Who Needs Your Help

You are a caregiver if you provide social or physical support to an aging relative or friend, or to a person who is disabled. Caregivers may make weekly visits to a sick mother still living on her own. They may bring a frail father into their home for care. Or they may arrange for services for a relative who lives hundreds of miles away. Family members provide the majority of in-home services to our older generation.

What caregivers share in common is the fact that they take time and energy from their lives to care for someone who needs their help.

## Reactions to Being a Caregiver

Caring for someone on a regular basis has its ups and downs. Naturally, there are the positive feelings associated with helping others. If you're caring for your mother, father or spouse, there is the satisfaction of knowing you are, in some way, returning the support they once provided you.

Let's face it, though—caring for someone else can have its drawbacks, too. Most caregivers experience some of these feelings:

- *Isolation*...a feeling of being alone with a huge responsibility
- *Worry* or doubt about the quality of care you are providing
- *Guilt* that you are not doing enough
- *Resentment* toward the person you are caring for
- *Anger* at the lack of time you have for yourself and your family
- *Frustration* that this is not what you had planned for yourself at this time in your life
- *Fear* about how much longer you can keep this up, given all of the other demands on your time
- *Confusion* about where to turn for help

- *Loss* because the person you love has changed so much
- *Fatigue*...both physical and emotional

Any of these responses, either alone or in combination, can lead to a sense of being overwhelmed. This is both common and understandable. The important thing is to monitor yourself and be alert to signs of caregiver exhaustion, which include:

- Feeling drained of time and energy
- Loss of sleep
- Bottled up feelings of anger/hostility
- Feeling trapped
- Reluctant to seek outside help
- Focused excessively on caregiving

## Taking Care of Yourself

There are steps you can take to avoid or reverse these responses to caregiving. Remember: taking care of yourself is part of taking care of the person who depends on you. Try some of these ideas drawn from the experiences of many caregivers like yourself:

**Share decision-making** – As long as the person you are caring for is able, involve him or her in the decisions that go along with care; try to make the person an active partner. It will help him or her retain a sense of independence, while taking some of the burden off of you.

**Remember your needs** – You need time to get away from your role as caregiver, to relax and to get additional support. Yes, these needs may create feelings of conflict or guilt, but remember: you are taking care of the person who needs you by taking care of yourself.

**Anticipate needs** – The earlier you discuss needs, the more time you have to explore possibilities. Then you will feel better about the

choices you need to make in the future.

**Understand what you are dealing with** – Gather information about the specific disease or conditions of your relative or friend. The more you know, the better you'll be able to plan for the future (including a back-up plan if something were to happen to you).

**Involve others** – Ask other family members and friends for help. People usually are willing and pleased to be asked; they just may not volunteer. Consider using a family meeting to brainstorm ideas and to see how to share responsibilities.

**Talk** – Share your reactions to caregiving with someone outside the family. Use a friend who isn't so close to the situation as a sounding-board.

**Be flexible** – Just when you think you are in control, something will change. Being thrown off balance is frustrating; try to anticipate change.

## Help is Available

As a caregiver, you are never alone. There are many people—family, friends, health care professionals, community services and others—who can help:

**Adult Day Care** provides daytime care and social activities for older adults. Programs will vary as to amount and type of care provided. Some provide transportation.

**Home Care** offers services that take place in the home. They can include: health care provided by professionals such as nurses and nurse aides; help with baths, dressing, and eating; housekeeping; and social visits.

**Hospice Care** provides support and care for terminally ill persons who choose to remain at home in the care of a relative or friend.

**Legal and Financial Services** include help with preparing a health care appointment and a living

will; or assistance with financial planning, public benefits, taxes, social security and disability benefits. These services can be provided by skilled volunteers or paid professionals.

**Long Term Care** is available through nursing homes and subacute care facilities for temporary or permanent care, especially during periods of acute illness.

**Meal Programs** offer a full range of services, including “Meals on Wheels,” which delivers meals to older adults at home, as well as group meals served at senior centers, churches or schools.

**Reassurance Programs** provide regular phone calls to check in on elderly people who live alone, or electronic monitoring devices that signal when help is needed.

**Rehabilitation Programs** provide occupational, physical and speech therapies through hospitals and long-term care and day care facilities.

**Respite Care** programs provide temporary relief for caregivers. A person comes into the home for prearranged periods of time while the regular caregiver takes a break. Some hospitals and nursing homes have short-term, overnight programs.

**Support Groups** provide emotional support, information sharing and companionship for caregivers. Some groups are disease-specific, such as Alzheimer’s disease support groups.

**Transportation Programs** provide rides to and from medical appointments, day care and other destinations.

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My Notes: