

CAREGIVER STRESS

Tips for taking care of yourself



As the population ages, more people are doing caregiving. About 1 in 3 adults in the United States is an informal or family caregiver.

A caregiver is anyone who helps another person in need. A person in need might be an ill spouse or partner, a child with a disability, or an aging friend or relative. Caregivers report higher levels of stress than do people who are not caregivers. It's important for caregivers to know that they, too, need help and support. It's common to feel angry, frustrated, worn out or sad. And it's common to feel alone.

Caregiver stress can put caregivers at risk of changes in their own health. Factors that can increase caregiver stress include:

- » Caring for a spouse.
- » Living with the person who needs care.
- » Caring for someone who needs constant care.
- » Feeling alone.
- » Feeling helpless or depressed.
- » Having money problems.
- » Having no choice about being a caregiver.
- » Not having good coping or problem-solving skills.

Signs of caregiver stress

As a caregiver, you may be so focused on your loved one that you don't see how caregiving affects your own health and well-being. The signs of caregiver stress include:

- » Feeling burdened or worrying all the time.
- » Feeling tired often.
- » Gaining or losing weight.
- » Becoming easily irked or angry.
- » Losing interest in activities you used to enjoy.
- » Feeling sad.
- » Having frequent headaches or other pains or health problems.
- » Misusing alcohol or drugs, including prescription medicines.

Too much stress over time can harm your health. As a caregiver, you might feel depressed or anxious. You might not get enough sleep or physical activity. Or you might not eat a balanced diet. All of these increase your risk of health conditions, such as heart disease and diabetes.

TO HELP MANAGE CAREGIVER STRESS:

Ask for and accept help. Make a list of ways in which others can help you. Then let them choose how to help. Ideas include taking regular walks with the person you care for, cooking a meal for you and helping with medical appointments.

Focus on what you can do. At times, you might feel like you're not doing enough. But no one is a perfect caregiver. Believe that you're doing the best you can.

Set goals you can reach. Break large tasks into smaller steps that you can do one at a time. Make lists of what's most important.

Follow a daily routine. Say no to requests that are draining, such as hosting meals for holidays or other occasions.

Take care of your health. Find ways to sleep better. Eat a healthy diet. Drink plenty of water.

Get connected. Learn about caregiving resources in your area. There might be classes you can take. You might find caregiving services such as rides, meal delivery or house cleaning.

Join a support group. People in support groups know what you're dealing with. They can cheer you on and help you solve problems.

Seek social support. Stay connected to family and friends who support you. Make time each week to visit with someone, even if it's just a walk or a quick cup of coffee.

See your health care professional. Get the vaccines you need and regular health screenings. Tell your health care professional that you're a caregiver. Talk about worries or symptoms you have.

RESPITE CARE

It may be hard to leave your loved one in someone else's care. But taking a break can be one of the best things you do for yourself and the person you're caring for. Types of respite care include:

In-home respite. Health care aides come to your home to spend time with your loved one or give nursing services or both.

Adult care centers and programs. There are centers that give day care for older adults. Some also care for young children. The two groups might spend time together.

Short-term nursing homes. Some assisted living homes, memory care homes and nursing homes accept people who need care for short stays while caregivers are away.

There's support for you!

- » **Meals-on-Wheels.** For assistance in finding help, contact your Employee Assistance Program (EAP). (<https://www.mealsonwheelsamerica.org>)
- » Find the local **Area Agency on Aging** office that serves your community. They have a wealth of information on local resources. (<https://www.n4a.org>)
- » Network with **other caregivers** to find out what services help.
- » Remember: Allowing help from outside sources is a way to take care of you.