

Prepare to Care

Self-Care for Family Caregivers

Being a caregiver can be a rewarding task, but it can also create feelings of stress, extreme pressure and a sense of having little control. These feelings may be more intense for a primary caregiver—the caregiver who is responsible for the health, safety, housing and overall well fair of another. It is not uncommon for such caregivers to provide a great deal of attention and time to the needs of the loved

one for whom they are providing care and as a result neglect their own physical and mental health. Yet, caregivers who fail to take care of themselves are at greater risk for experiencing negative long-



term consequences, including mental and physical strain, depression, compromised immune systems, exacerbated chronic conditions and compromised safety. Beyond mental and physical health, caregivers may be at risk for financial strain, losing their jobs, disruptions in school, difficulties with relationships and being socially isolated. A caregiver who fails to take care of him/herself ultimately will be unable to properly care for others. Therefore, it is important for family caregivers to maintain their health and keep up their energy. According to AARP, “It is just as important to make a plan to take care of yourself as it is to create a caregiving plan for others.” To improve the quality of life for family caregivers it is

recommended that caregivers take care of themselves in regard to (1) physical care; (2) eating smart and healthy; (3) exercising; (4) getting enough sleep; (5) stress management; (6) tuning in to feelings; (7) staying socially connected; and (8) self-advocacy.

Taking Care of YOU

Take Care of Your Physical Self

It is not uncommon for family caregivers to report that caregiving has caused their physical health to deteriorate. This is often due to chronic negative stress which can present itself in many ways including: headaches; tension or pain in the neck, back or stomach; problems with sleeping; and miscommunication with others. To help maintain physical health, it is important to exercise, eat healthy and smart, and manage stress and sleep.

Eat Smart and Healthy

Healthy eating may help reduce the risk of heart disease, obesity, diabetes and even some cancers. It can also make a person feel more alert and energetic. Some studies demonstrate that healthy eating may even help protect the brain. The USDA “My Plate” recommends eating well-balanced meals, including foods from a variety of foods, half plate of fruits and vegetables, one-quarter whole grains, one-quarter lean protein and a cup of low-fat or fat-free dairy. If a snack is needed, try to eat and snack on healthy foods that are low in sugar, saturated fat and sodium. It is also important to stay hydrated for overall health. It keeps the heart pumping and muscles working efficiently. Dehydration can cause dizziness, heart palpitations, confusion, sluggishness, weakness and fainting. The USDA encourages people to maintain the appropriate calories needed for specific height, weight, sex, age and activity level. A health care provider or dietitian can discuss specific caloric recommendations. Also, using SuperTracker at www.supertracker.usda.gov/ is recommended so that the caregivers can look up their nutritional needs and make a healthy meal plan for themselves and their loved one.

Exercise

Exercise is an important part of staying healthy. Not only does it strengthen muscles and bones, but it may help relieve stress, control weight, boost the immune system, decrease the risk for chronic diseases, certain cancers, diabetes and dementia, and enhance mental

health and mood. Feeling good and healthy helps caregivers with both the physical and emotional demands of being a caregiver. The CDC

recommends that adults exercise at least 150 minutes per week. At a minimum, such exercise should include moderate-intensity aerobic

activity such as brisk walking, running, bike riding or swimming. It should also include muscle strength activities

at least two days a week. If exercise is not yet a habit, start small. The CDC and Alzheimer's Association say that even 10 minutes a day can make a difference. Make it a goal to make

exercise a habit. It is easier to make exercise a part of a daily routine if it is an activity that is enjoyed and works for a person's time and schedule. Maybe this means stretching or riding a stationary bike while a loved one naps at home or maybe a loved one joins the walk around the block. Some people like the social aspect of exercise because it holds them accountable, while others like the solitude of fitness and use it as time to themselves. Consultation with a health professional is recommended before engaging in strenuous physical activity or radically changing activity level.

Sleep

Despite how hard it may be to balance work, family and other priorities with caregiving, it is important not to miss out on sleep. Sleep disturbances are often associated with caregiving, especially among those who provide round-the-clock



care. As a result, sleep quantity and quality may be reduced. Poor sleep over a long period of time can contribute to adverse health consequences such as obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, anxiety and depression. To help improve sleep, the National Institute on Aging suggests: developing a bedtime routine, such as taking a hot bath or shower and “winding down” about an hour before bedtime; avoiding exercise within three hours of bedtime; avoiding heavy meals before bedtime; and limiting technology use at bedtime and in the bedroom (TV, computer, cell phone).

Stress Management

Many caregivers juggle family, work and the person who needs care, which can be stressful. A buildup of stress over time can be harmful to overall health and well-being in addition to affecting the ability to provide proper care, especially for long-term caregivers. The pressure from both work and/or family and taking care of a loved one can feel overwhelming, frustrating and even hopeless, all common signs of negative stress. Over time, negative stress can cause headaches, heart problems, difficulty with sleeping and it can even contribute to chronic disease and dementia. To help manage stress, AARP recommends acknowledging emotions about the caregiving role and how these feelings can influence the caregiving relationship and process. AARP also encourages caregivers to take time for themselves—whether it is to eat healthy, exercise, sleep or simply take a break from the caregiving duty to do nothing. Caregivers deserve at least 10 minutes a day to themselves. Support groups can be helpful and comforting, especially when a caregiver feels alone or overwhelmed. Federal policies and programs are also available to some employees to help caregivers who work. For example, the Family and Medical Leave Act allows eligible employees to take “unpaid job-protected leave.” To help manage to-do lists, appointments and other scheduling support, AARP offers a Caregiving app at www.aarp.org/. In addition, AARP offers the Rx app at www.aarp.org/rxapp to help manage a loved one’s medication.

Tune-in to Feelings

An estimated 40 percent of family caregivers report their caregiving situation to be “highly stressful” and those individuals who provide more hours of care tend to find their role more emotionally stressful. It is not uncommon for caregivers to report feeling frustrated, anger, fatigue, helplessness, anxious, depressed, sad,

overwhelmed, anxious, irrational and fearful. To help address these feelings, it is important to:

- **Breathe Deeply.** Breathe in through the nose until the stomach expands and then exhale slowly through the mouth. Repeat 3-4 times.
- **Meditate.** Concentrating on the present, tell yourself that you are “relaxed and calm.” To help calm the mind, it can be helpful to focus on a short spiritual passage, song lyric or poem that is meaningful. Repeat for 5 to 15 minutes.
- **Exercise Mindfulness.** While walking, concentrate on breathing and the feel of the ground under foot. Let in only the present, the sky, the view, the other walkers, the feel of the breeze. Live for and enjoy the moment, even if it just for a moment.
- **Seek Distraction.** Take a break from carving to focus on other aspects of individual daily living, from paying bills and running errands, to finding time to include hobbies and pastimes that produce joy. Recognize that not everything can be done or figured out overnight in regards to caregiving.
- **Find a friend who will listen.** Each caregiver has a voice and a right to be heard—the good, the bad and the ugly.
- **Limit busywork and the unimportant “stuff”.** Caregiving is a full time job that is often balanced with a full-time job. Recognize that a caregiver owes him/herself a break from being always perfect and getting everything done. Prioritizing can help with the balance of time and caregiver juggling act.

Social Connections

Meaningful social connections are an important aspect of self-care for family caregivers. Relationships with other people offer physical and emotional comfort in both the good and challenging times. When it comes to caregiving, it is important to celebrate the good days and know that you can lean on someone on the bad days. Social support can play a significant role in increasing life satisfaction for both caregivers and their loved ones. In addition, meaningful social connections are also associated with higher rates of happiness and overall well-being, enhanced health, decreased risk for depression, loneliness and social isolation. Some studies even show that meaningful social connectedness contributes to longevity and overall life quality. Social support can come in many

different forms including other family, friends and support networks that may include neighbors, a spiritual community, formal support groups and even professional health care providers. Many caregivers find people who have been through or are going through a similar circumstance to be helpful because they can relate to the caregiving experience first-hand. It can be helpful to identify the people to whom a caregiver can turn to for emotional support (a shoulder to cry on), practical support (someone to help around the house, run errand or provide childcare) or a combination of both. There is no need to be ashamed about asking for help—no one can do it all. Contact the community social services, local area agency on aging or senior center to find out about care managers, respite care, transportation services, home delivered meals, respite and other services in your area. The Eldercare Locator at www.eldercare.gov/Eldercare.NET/Public/Index.aspx can also be useful in identifying necessary services in the community. Existing technology such as mobile apps, emergency response systems, self-reminder devices and care monitoring are convenient and cost-free modes of practical help.

Be Your Own Advocate

Because it is rare for people to have practiced caregiving, many people enter the role unprepared. AARP encourages caregivers to stand up for themselves and to ask for help and support because it will be needed. Caregiving is a ride with many ups and downs. As a result, it requires a team, communication and planning and support. If the role of primary family caregiver has developed, AARP suggests telling a health care provider first. Not only will you need your loved one's health information, but it is important that a health care professional knows what lies ahead for the caregiver too. It is also important to ask a health care provider about caregiver trainings, support groups and assistance that can help make the job easier, safer and more satisfactory for both the caregiver and their loved one.

Conclusion

Making a plan of caring for yourself is just as important as caring for your loved one. Self-care helps family caregivers have the energy and strength to provide quality physical and emotional care, while reducing the stress and strain from the caring work. As a result, self-care contributes to a healthy, safe and quality

caregiving process that is more manageable and enjoyable for both the caregiver and his or her loved one.

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January 2018

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