As the population ages, more caregiving is being provided by people who aren’t health care professionals. These informal caregivers provide 80 percent of long-term care in the United States. A caregiver is anyone who provides help to another person in need, such as an ill spouse or partner, a disabled child, or an aging relative. Nearly 60 percent of caregivers work outside of the home.

However, family members who are actively caring for an older adult often don’t self-identify as a “caregiver.” Recognizing this role can help caregivers receive the support they need.

CAREGIVING IS REWARDING BUT STRESSFUL

Caregiving can have many rewards. For most caregivers, being there when a loved one needs you is a core value and something you wish to provide.

But a shift in roles and emotions is almost certain. It is natural to feel angry, frustrated, exhausted, alone or sad. Caregiver stress – the emotional and physical stress of caregiving – is common.

People who experience caregiver stress can be vulnerable to changes in their own health. Risk factors for caregiver stress include:

- Being female
- Having fewer years of formal education
- Living with the person you are caring for
- Social isolation
- Having depression

CAREGIVER STRESS: TIPS FOR TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF

Caring for a loved one strains even the most resilient people. If you’re a caregiver, take steps to preserve your own health and well-being.

1. Ask family members for help. Include them in making decisions. Let them know how you appreciate their help and that you cannot do it all.

2. Share the tasks. Make a list of weekly tasks, and share that list with your family. You don’t have to do everything. Believing only one person can do this leads to exhaustion quickly.

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SIGNS OF CAREGIVER STRESS

As a caregiver, you may be so focused on your loved one that you don’t realize that your own health and well-being are suffering. Watch for these signs of caregiver stress:

- Feeling overwhelmed or constantly worried
- Feeling tired most of the time
- Sleeping too much or too little
- Gaining or losing a lot of weight
- Becoming easily irritated or angry
- Losing interest in activities you used to enjoy
- Feeling sad
- Having frequent headaches, bodily pain or other physical problems

Financial difficulties
- Higher number of hours spent caregiving
- Lack of coping skills and difficulty solving problems
- Lack of choice in being a caregiver

"Keeping in Touch" is a monthly publication for employees covered by The Village Employee Assistance Program (EAP) through their employer’s benefit package. If you have questions about your EAP benefit, or if you would like to access services, call 1-800-627-8220.
Abusing alcohol or drugs, including prescription medications too much stress, especially over a long time, can harm your health. As a caregiver, you're more likely to experience symptoms of depression or anxiety. In addition, you may not get enough sleep or physical activity, or eat a balanced diet— which increases your risk of medical problems, such as heart disease and diabetes.

STRATEGIES FOR DEALING WITH CAREGIVER STRESS

The emotional and physical demands involved with caregiving can strain even the most resilient person. That's why it's so important to take advantage of the many resources and tools available to help you provide care for your loved one. Remember, if you don’t take care of yourself, you won’t be able to care for anyone else.

To help manage caregiver stress, accept help from others. Understand that no one is a “perfect” caregiver. Believe that you are doing the best you can and making the best decisions you can at any given time. Prioritize, make lists and establish a daily routine. Find out about caregiving services in your community, such as classes, transportation, meal delivery and support groups.

1. Put your own health first. Be sure to schedule and go to your medical check-ups.
2. Eat healthy foods, and get enough sleep.
4. Take a breath. Try stress reduction techniques like deep breathing and meditation.

Several groups offer advice on caregiving. They include: AARP, Alzheimer’s Association, Eldercare Locator, Family Caregiver Alliance, Medicare, National Center for Assisted Living, National Hospice and Palliative Care Center, and the National Resource Center on Supportive Housing and Home Modification. Wellthy.com is a site with information on finding/completing the necessary legal documents, dealing with insurance providers, managing medications and developing a suitable care plan for your patient.

There are resources to help you help your mom. Take advantage of them to keep the caregiving experience as positive as possible for both of you.

If you work outside the home and are feeling overwhelmed, consider taking a break from your job. Employees covered under the federal Family and Medical Leave Act may be able to take up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave a year to care for relatives. Ask your human resources office about options for unpaid leave.

If you’re like many caregivers, you have a hard time asking for help. Unfortunately, this attitude can lead to feeling isolated, frustrated and even depressed.

Rather than struggling on your own, take advantage of local resources for caregivers. You may also consider speaking to a counselor, a service provided at no cost to you through your Employee Assistance Program. Call 1-800-627-8220 to access your EAP benefits.

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WORRIED ABOUT MONEY?

We can help! Financial counseling is part of your EAP. Call 1-800-627-8220 for more info.