



Healthy Lifestyle

Stress management

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.

By Mayo Clinic Staff

As the population ages, more caregiving is being provided by people who aren't health care professionals. About 1 in 3 adults in the United States provides care to other adults as informal caregivers.

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

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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 often
- Getting too much sleep or not enough sleep
- Gaining or losing 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
- 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.

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.** Be prepared with a list of ways that others can help you, and let the helper choose what he or she would like to do. For instance, a friend may offer to take the person you care for on a walk a couple of times a week. Or a friend or family member may be able to run an errand, pick up your groceries or cook for you.
- **Focus on what you are able to provide.** It's normal to feel guilty sometimes, but 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.
- **Set realistic goals.** Break large tasks into smaller steps that you can do one at a time. Prioritize, make lists and establish a daily routine. Begin to say no to requests that are draining, such as hosting holiday meals.
- **Get connected.** Find out about caregiving resources in your community. Many communities have classes specifically about the disease your loved one is facing. Caregiving services such as transportation, meal delivery or housekeeping may be available.
- **Join a support group.** A support group can provide validation and encouragement, as well as problem-solving strategies for difficult situations. People in support groups understand what you may be going through. A support group can also be a good place to create meaningful friendships.

- **Seek social support.** Make an effort to stay well-connected with family and friends who can offer nonjudgmental emotional support. Set aside time each week for connecting, even if it's just a walk with a friend.
- **Set personal health goals.** For example, set goals to establish a good sleep routine, find time to be physically active on most days of the week, eat a healthy diet and drink plenty of water.

Many caregivers have issues with sleeping. Not getting quality sleep over a long period of time can cause health issues. If you have trouble getting a good night's sleep, talk to your doctor.

- **See your doctor.** Get recommended vaccinations and screenings. Make sure to tell your doctor that you're a caregiver. Don't hesitate to mention any concerns or symptoms you have.

It may be hard to imagine leaving your loved one in someone else's care, but taking a break can be one of the best things you do for yourself — as well as the person you're caring for. Most communities have some type of respite care available, such as:

- **In-home respite.** Health care aides come to your home to provide companionship, nursing services or both.
- **Adult care centers and programs.** Some centers provide care for both older adults and young children, and the two groups may spend time together.
- **Short-term nursing homes.** Some assisted living homes, memory care homes and nursing homes accept people needing care for short stays while caregivers are away.

Nearly 60% of caregivers work outside of the home. If you work outside the home and you're a caregiver, you may begin to feel overwhelmed. If you do, think about taking leave from your job for a period of time.

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. To get started, check out the Eldercare Locator or contact your local Area Agency on Aging (AAA) to learn about services in your community. You can find your local AAA online or in the government section of your telephone directory.

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