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caring for those you care about

Managing **the Stress**

Caregiver Stress Quiz

Score each item as:

1 (Never) **2** (Once or twice)
3 (Rarely) **4** (Sometimes)
5 (Often) **6** (Usually) **7** (Always)

In caring for a loved one, how often do you have the following experiences:

___ Feeling resentful

___ Feeling trapped

___ Being tired, not getting enough sleep

___ Feeling weary

___ Feeling troubled

___ Feeling helpless

___ Poor appetite or overeating

___ Being physically exhausted

___ Feeling disillusioned

___ Feeling useless

___ Being utterly drained of feeling

___ Feeling "burned out"

___ Being unhappy

___ Feeling anxious

___ Feeling rejected

___ **Total**

If your score is under 60, you're in good shape. If your total score is 60 or above, the stress of taking care of your parent is beginning to take its toll; if it's 90 or above, you are living with caregiver burnout. You are not alone! Research shows that most caregivers experience stress and strain. Prolonged stress can have serious physical and emotional consequences.

The good news is that you can manage caregiver stress and improve your physical and mental health to benefit yourself, your parents, and others who depend on you. This tip sheet explains the importance of managing caregiver stress constructively, and describes coping skills that have helped others deal with related issues.

Causes and Effects

You feel guilty because you're not doing enough and frustrated because you can't fix the problem. You can't remember the last time you slept through the night without a call from your father. You can't bear to see what's happening to your mother. Caring for your parents has put your social, intellectual, and work life on hold. You're angry because your efforts don't seem to be appreciated, your siblings criticize and interfere — don't get involved enough — and your family doesn't pick up the slack around the house.

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If you're caring for an older parent, you probably recognize at least some of these common sources of stress. According to the survey mentioned above, one in five caregivers say the biggest difficulty is the demand on their time or not being able to do what they want. Other key reasons for caregiver stress include inadequate training for medical and other care, the frustrations of dealing with the health care and social service systems, and financial concerns. In addition, many caregivers don't use community services that could help reduce their stress. Some say they are too busy to use services, while others don't know they are available or can't afford to take advantage.

Today, we know experiencing stress is not just unpleasant; it can negatively affect our health, well-being, and ability to provide care. For example, stress appears to increase the risk of serious illnesses such as heart disease and cancer, as well as worsening conditions such as asthma and insomnia, which also undermine well-being. In extreme cases, it also may lead to inadequate care or even verbal or physical abuse of an older parent.

What You Can Do

When you are caring for others, taking care of yourself and your needs is like performing regular maintenance on your car. It is critical to staying in shape over time. Here are some of the ways you might nurture yourself to cope with stress and improve your well-being:

- **Take care of your health.**
  What to do: Eat nutritious meals; don't give in to stress-driven urges for sweets or overindulgence in alcohol. Get enough sleep; if you are awakened at night try napping during the day to make up your sleep. Get regular medical check-ups. Exercise regularly, even if it means finding someone else to provide care while you walk or go to exercise class. If you have any symptoms of depression (extreme sadness, trouble concentrating, apathy, hopelessness, thoughts about death), see a doctor right away. Depression is an illness that must be treated.

- **Maintain social contacts.**
  Steps to take: This may take advance planning, but it's worth it. Isolation increases stress, while having fun, laughing, and focusing on something besides your problems can help you keep your emotional balance.

- **Call on friends and relatives for help.** Make up a list of tasks you need help with and ask friends and relatives if they could contribute regularly or even occasionally. Don't forget that those who live at a distance from your parent can still provide some kinds of support.
  Options to consider: Your spouse and children. Siblings, aunts, uncles, and grandchildren. Nieces, nephews, and other relatives. Step-relatives and in-laws. Friends and neighbors. People from faith-based groups or clubs.
  What they could do: Household tasks (food shopping, cooking some meals, cleaning, laundry). Home repair or maintenance. Driving. Taking care of finances, such as paying bills. Finding information on services you need. Giving you a break (such as staying with your mom while you get away for a while).

- **Get additional help from community services and organizations.**
  Options to consider: A geriatric care manager to coordinate all aspects of your parent's care. Home health aides. Shopping assistance. Homemaker or someone to do home repairs. Meal services. Information and referral programs. Volunteers and/or staff from faith-based organizations or civic groups to visit or help with driving.

- **Use community services to get a break.** Don't feel guilty about needing time off, and remember that your parent may also benefit from having someone else around.
  Options to consider: Respite care (for some time off) by friends, relatives, or volunteers at home or at an adult day center. Or perhaps try for a weekend or longer vacation (using home health agencies, nursing homes, assisted living residences, and board and care homes, which will sometimes accept a short-term resident when they have space). Adult day centers, which usually operate five days a week during business hours, provide care in a group setting to older people who need supervision (including health monitoring, transportation, nursing care, and therapeutic recreation).

- **Seek support.** Some research suggests that keeping your feelings bottled up can harm your immune system and lead to physical illness.
  Options to consider: Talk with friends and family about the rewards and challenges of caregiving. Share experiences with coworkers in similar situations. Pray (the most common coping mechanism for caregivers, according to the survey cited above). See a professional counselor. Join a caregiver support group to share emotions and experiences, seek and give advice, and exchange practical information with your peers.

- **Try to find time for yourself to unwind when stresses pile up.** Do something you enjoy, like reading, walking, or listening to music. Some people find it helps to meditate or use relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing or visualizing being somewhere that makes you feel happy or calm.

- **Organize.** Having a plan will give you more time for yourself.
  Steps to take: Set priorities and realistic goals. Make a list of what needs to be done (caregiving and other responsibilities), and get the most important things done first. Pace yourself; don't overwork yourself some days to the point of exhaustion. Set limits and learn to say "no."

- **Deal constructively with negative feelings.**
  Steps to take: When feeling resentful, think about how to change things. Recognize the anger-guilt-anger cycle, and stop it immediately by forgiving yourself for being angry. Then distance yourself from the situation, figure out what caused the anger, and decide how you can respond more constructively the next time. Focus on the good points. Hold a family meeting to resolve conflicts with siblings and other relatives. Feel good about your accomplishments as a caregiver instead of emphasizing your shortcomings.