

Aging Consideration: Caregiving

Caregiving can be a gift. It can also be a burden. Helping a sick or needy person, especially a loved one, can take its toll on the body, mind, emotions and spirit. Stress is a common outcome of the physically, emotionally and mentally demanding work that caregiving entails.

It is very important that caregivers monitor their levels of stress. Caregivers must take steps to prevent damaging their personal health, social supports and mental health.

The following are indicators of caregiving stress: health problems, fatigue, guilt, insomnia, loss of concentration, irritability, anger, depression, anxiety, withdrawal and denial.

Caregivers are at higher than normal risk for mental health disorders, and should have a plan of self-care and stress management early in the caregiving process.

It is common for caregivers to become more involved without noticing how much time and energy is gradually being given to the job. When the symptoms of stress compound, gradually (or perhaps suddenly), caregivers can feel burned out, exhausted and “at wits-end.” Unfortunately, this is how caregivers can unknowingly or unintentionally become abusive to the person in their care. Elder abuse is very rarely planned. It most commonly happens as a result of caregiver burnout.

A caregiver self-care plan might include red flags for stress symptoms and steps to take to keep stress at a relative minimum. It might also include support and resource information to employ when needs are greater.

Some questions caregivers can ask themselves:

- What are reasonable and realistic limitations I have with regard to my physical ability to provide care?
- How can I make sure that I give myself time each day to take care of my own personal needs and responsibilities?
- Do I know all I can about the illness, limitations and supports of the person I care for so that my expectations are realistic and I know how to respond to their needs and behaviors?
- Do I feel comfortable with the personal care needs (bathing, toileting, etc) of the person I care for? If not, how can I handle that situation?
- Who can I talk to about the feelings I have about caregiving and know that I will be supported and encouraged? Who can help me problem solve when I feel stuck?
- How will I know when it's time to get more help for the work that I do or the feelings I'm having?