

Dealing with Caregiver Depression and Anxiety

As we move into the end of one year and prepare for a new year many caregivers may experience depression and anxiety. What might happen in 2012? How is the economy going to affect being able to take care of (parents) (spouse)? What changes being discussed about health care will mean that I may have to pay more for care? Am I doing the right thing? What more should I be doing? What less should I be doing? What about me?

Depression may be caused by health problems, medication interactions, or a feeling of being out of control of one's life and unable to manage the stress of balancing priorities in your life. Caregiver anxiety and depression is associated with caring for an older family as well as relationships with a spouse, older adult children or younger children, co-workers and supervisors, managing the household budget, and many other responsibilities. As the health of an older family member declines, the responsibility of care increases and challenges the delicate balancing act of responsibility and taking care of you.

Is it time to step back and take a look at how you are coping? Below are some recognized symptoms of depression and anxiety. If you are experience several of these symptoms it is time to take action. Identify where are they coming from. How can a few lifestyle changes and better medical care improve the quality of your life?

Signs and symptoms of depression

- Feeling of intense sadness, anxiety, insensibility, guilt or a combination of all of them
- Recurring negative thoughts
- Inability to focus
- Loss of interest in people and the things around you
- Constant mood swings
- Experiencing thoughts of causing harm to yourself or to others
- Chronic fatigue
- Loss of interest in appearance
- Tend to get very agitated
- Loss of interest in activities you once loved and enjoyed
- Experiencing changes of your sleep pattern
- Loss of appetite
- Gain or loss of weight
- Constipation

Signs and symptoms of anxiety:

- Constantly tense, worried, or on edge
- Plagued by fears that you know are irrational, but can't seem to stop thinking about
- Believe that something bad will happen if certain things aren't done a certain way
- Avoid everyday situations or activities because they make you anxious
- Experience sudden, unexpected attacks of heart-pounding panic
- Feel like danger and catastrophe are around every corner

Remember that the older adults you care for may also experience many of these symptoms. See below for what to do for you and for them.

What to do

1. Get a complete medical examination and report your symptoms. Check the symptoms on this newsletter and take a copy of it with you to your appointment.

2. Take medications currently prescribed and be open to recommendations for medications from your health care team.
3. Make exercise a top priority. If you exercise or walk you will find more energy.
4. Focus on eating healthfully not losing weight. If you eat the right foods you will gradually weigh the best weight for you.
5. Practice deep breathing several times a day – *it works!*
6. Ask yourself these questions: What can I control? What can I let go because it is outside of my control?
 - A good reminder: “Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.”
7. Get as much sleep as you can.
8. Talk to family members and ask for specific help to re-balance your priorities. They may not understand where your stress is coming from and why you behave the way that you do toward them.
9. Take a “time out” whenever possible: a half to a full day off to rest and relax and breaks at work. Can you go away for a weekend?
10. Don’t take personally what the person you care for does or says.
11. Recognize what you *are* doing and what is working *not* what is not working. Are you being too hard on yourself?
12. Contact the Aging and Disability Resource Center or Area Agency on Aging to find out what help might be available for you and the person you care for: support groups, education, respite care, and help at home with the family member you care for. Go to www.familycaregiversonline.net and click on one of the logos at the bottom to find the resource for your community.

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on behalf of
caregiver education and support programs of
Local area agencies on aging.