Caring for the Caregiver – Part 1 of 2

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Caregiving can start abruptly with the onset of a serious health condition or it might start with the occurrence of an unexpected heart attack or stroke. The need for care can also begin when a person experiences slight limitations associated with the normal aging process.

In any case, caregivers face a number of challenges:

- learning basic health care skills
- coping with physical
- emotional, and financial stress
- understanding legal options
- assessing the service system

Learning how to balance conflicting demands while dealing with potentially stressful family dynamics can be most challenging of all. Some caregivers handle these challenges better than others.

I love the following saying, “You may be only one person in the world, but you may also be the world to one person.” Isn’t that so true, especially when we talk about caregiving?

Caregiving responsibilities can lead to feelings of love, generosity, and a strengthening of family ties. These caregivers are thankful for the opportunity to provide care and to share in the journey of the care receiver’s life.

For others, these responsibilities can be overwhelming and lead to isolation, physical illness, financial devastation and loss of employment. In severe cases, caregiver exhaustion can lead to abuse or financial exploitation of the care receiver.

Caregiving is a process that often involves a tremendous sacrifice of time and energy. It is often emotionally charged and demanding. Many seniors will, at some point in their later years, be both caregivers and care receivers and it is important to understand the caregiving process. Caregiving, simply stated, is one person giving care to another.

Caregiving is a global issue, as countries around the world are facing aging populations. Today, in America approximately 10,000 Baby Boomers are turning 65 every day which will greatly affect the aging population for us in the years to come. Caregiving provided outside of facilities is the backbone of the long-term care system.

The value of unpaid care for adults is estimated to be more than $250 billion dollars annually. In addition to its economic impact, caregiving exacts a toll on caregivers, who often experience compromised health, personal financial strain and intense emotional stress.

Who Provides Care?

About 45 million Americans or more than 21% of the adult population act as caregivers. An estimated 17%, or 18 million households in the United States, contain at least one caregiver who provides care to someone age 50 or older. 83% of caregivers are related to their care recipients; with the remaining 17% coming from outside the family.
A typical caregiver is female and is approximately 46 years old, has some college experience, and spends an average of 20 hours or more per week providing care to someone age 50 or older. However, one out of every three caregivers in America or about 14.5 million caregivers are male. Although male caregivers are fewer in number, they are just as dedicated, diligent and determined to help their loved one or friend live the best life he or she possibly can.

**Who Receives Care?**

65% of care recipients are female/35% are male. 65% of caregivers say other unpaid caregivers assist them in their role – this would include other family members and friends. 46% said they also employ others to assist them in providing care. More that half of care recipients live in their own homes.

**Length of Care Provided**

The average duration of caregiving is 4.3 years. About 3 in 10 caregivers have been providing care for 5 or more years. About 1 in 4 caregivers or 24% say the person they care for lives in the same household with them. We have already identified that caregiving is not an easy job so let’s turn our attention to techniques and tips to help caregivers identify and handle stress associated with their many responsibilities. I hope you enjoy the following article.

**Stress Management**

A lecturer, when explaining stress management to an audience, raised a glass of water and asked, “How heavy is this glass of water?”

Answers called out ranging from 20g to 500g.

The lecturer replied, “The absolute weight doesn’t matter. It depends on how long you try to hold it.”

“If I hold it for a minute, that’s not a problem.”

“If I hold it for an hour, I’ll have an ache in my right arm.”

“If I hold it for a day, you’ll have to call an ambulance.”

“In each case, it’s the same weight, but the longer I hold it, the heavier it becomes.”

The lecturer continued, “And that’s the way it is with stress management. If we carry our burdens all the time, sooner or later, as the burden becomes increasingly heavy, we won’t be able to carry on. As with the glass of water you have to put it down for a while and rest before holding it again. When we’re refreshed, we can carry on with the burden.” “So, before you return home tonight, put the burden of work down. Don’t carry it home. You can pick it up tomorrow. Whatever burdens you’re carrying now, let them down for a moment if you can. Relax; pick them up after you’ve rested. Life is short. Enjoy it!”

Look for more discussion on Stress Management in the Caring for the Caregiver Part 2 July, 2012 newsletter.

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