

DEPRESSED ABOUT CAREGIVING?

Have you ever had to check on or take care of elderly relative after a long day at work, before getting home to your immediate family? Or give up a weekend to help an elderly parent with chores and personal issues? Do you feel resentment for having to give up your time for someone else, and then guilt, because they are a loved one? You are not alone with these issues and these feelings.

Nearly 66 million individuals, or one of out every five citizens in the United State, have served as caregivers for an ill or disabled relative, with a majority of caregivers being female. While men are more likely to assist in financial situations or arrange for other care, women are most often tasks with difficult caregiving tasks such as toileting and bathing. Of this volume, over 43 million are caring for an individual over the age of 50, and 15 million individual care for someone with Alzheimer's Disease. Furthermore, nearly half of all caregivers have been found to be responsible for performing medical and nursing tasks. Typically, most caregivers have spent three or more years caring for an individual, and usually spend 13 days per month on shopping, food preparation, housekeeping, laundry, transportation, and giving medication to the individual they care for, and 6 days per month on feeding, dressing, grooming, walking, bathing, and assistance in toileting.

As a result of this usually unpaid burden, caregiving of an elderly parent often results in added stress in an individual's day-to-day activities. Seven out of every ten caregivers are typically forced to rearrange their work schedule due to this added responsibility, or decrease their hours via unpaid leave. Over 37% of caregiver are forced to quit their jobs or reduce their work hours to care for an individual aged 50+.

These factors further compound into both physical and mental issues arising for caregivers. Mortality among caregivers has been found to be higher among individuals who had Diabetes or Coronary Heart Disease when compared to similar patients who were not caregivers. Not surprisingly, caregivers are found to have higher levels of depression, perceived stress, and lower levels of self-efficacy than non-caregivers. It has been clinically proven that 16% of caregivers have major depression, while another 10% have depressive disorders. A simple test, the Zarit Burden Interview, can help a clinician or a gerontologist determine the severity of the stress the caregiver is under, and can be clicked at the end of this article.

Part of the difficulty in being a caregiver is the unfortunate understanding that the individual being cared for will not improve in most instances, and will, in fact, decline in both health and mental well-being. However, the caregiver must realize when he or she is overwhelmed and feeling depressed, there are solutions available to help. In addition to respite care allowing the caregiver time to rest and recoup, there are also support groups where fellow caregivers meet, both in various settings as well as online. It should be noted that many individuals would benefit from professional therapy as they confront the stress of caring for an aging parent, and this is often recognized and recommended by physicians who work with elderly patients and their adult caregivers. The following activities can help manage the stress brought on from caregiving:

- Accept help from family and friends, with helping care for the elderly individual, or helping with tasks you normally do in your own life. You are not alone in this endeavor.
- Make sure you are eating healthy and getting plenty of rest to maintain your own health; if you do not take care of yourself, it will be difficult to take care of an elderly loved one
- Consider respite care to temporarily relieve you of some of the duties of caregiving. Respite care includes in-home nursing aide visits, Adult Day Care centers, and even short-term nursing homes
- If you are employed full-time, keep in mind that 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 officer about options for unpaid leave

By allowing yourself to rest and recharge, you will be a healthier, happier, and better caregiver for your loved one. Schedule time for yourself, including exercise, meeting with friends, and taking time to relax. Giving yourself time that you need for yourself will also reduce the resentment of the time you give caring for a loved one, and allow you to focus and become reenergized. Remember, you are not alone, and discussing these issues with others, whether they are family, friends, or a support group, will also relieve you of the mental burden you carry.

Zarit Burden Interview: <http://www.aafp.org/afp/2000/1215/p2613.html>)



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