Family Caregivers: Dealing With Feelings

Caring for someone with Alzheimer’s or other memory disorder can be a tremendously challenging experience for families. Yet many caregivers firmly believe it’s their duty to care for older parents and spouses. Others are reluctant to seek help because they don’t think anyone would be willing to lend a helping hand. Some caregivers simply don’t know what kind of help to ask for.

The stress of caregiving responsibilities frequently leans to serious physical, mental and emotional problems for the caregivers. Older spouses who struggle to care for an ill spouse and parents juggling jobs along with child and parent care – are especially at risk for caregiver burnout and stress-related conditions. These individuals are frequently too exhausted to enjoy the company of their older relative.

CAREGIVER STRESS: SIGNS & SYMPTOMS

Caregiver stress is especially common in people caring for relatives with memory loss or multiple health problems. Warning signs of caregiver burnout include:

- Lack of energy, fatigue, sleeplessness
- Little or no time for themselves
- Frequently feeling tense, find it difficult to relax
- Being impatient with their relative
- Feeling hopeless, overwhelmed, depressed
- Frequent colds, flu and other ailments; neglecting their own health
- No longer take pride in caring for their family member

Recognize any of these symptoms? If so, it’s important to learn new coping skills that will help you provide your relative with the best of care, and renew your pride in your strength and ability to do so. Contact your local Alzheimer's Association for information about caregiver support groups, educational programs, helplines, care consultations, and a variety of other programs, publications and services.

UNDERSTANDING EMOTIONS

Some days you probably feel like you’re on an emotional roller coaster. Common feelings caregivers experience are:

- Anger. Bottling up angry feelings affects your physical, mental and emotional health. Express strong feelings to an understanding friend or family member – not the person you care for. He or she probably won't understand why you are angry and may become upset or frightened. Writing about your feelings or taking a brisk walk around the block are good ways to vent emotions. When you get angry you're likely to feel sad and guilty afterwards. Such feelings are normal. Forgive yourself and tell yourself that you are doing the best you can in a stressful situation.

- Feeling tied down and isolated: Make taking time for you a priority. Call a good friend or relative and ask them to stay with your parent while you take a nap or go shopping.

- Avoid angry outbursts by giving yourself a time-out when a stressful situation occurs. Diffuse your feelings by taking a short walk, pulling weeds in the garden, or punching a bed pillow. Wash your face and forgive yourself for getting angry.

A good way to feel better about yourself is to attend a caregiver support group meeting. Contact your local chapter of the Alzheimer’s Association ([www.alz.org](http://www.alz.org)) for information about support groups in your area. Most chapters offer a variety of programs and services for caregivers and the people they care for at no cost.
You probably miss the person your parent or spouse was before he or she became ill. It's normal to feel sad for such a loss. Share your feelings with a good friend or another relative who may also have the same feelings that you do. Write down the good memories you have of your relative before he became ill.

**SELF-CARE FOR CAREGIVERS**

Go easy on yourself. Caring for someone with memory loss is physically, emotionally and mentally draining. So when a friend, neighbor or another family member offers to help you, don't hesitate to take him or her up on the offer. Have some specific things they can do for you -- take a walk with your loved one, rake leaves, shovel snow, pick up groceries or the dry cleaning. Ask a close friend to stay with your loved one while you take a nap, get your hair cut or go to the mall.

If your loved one is having a bad day, remind yourself of the things he or she can still do – not what he can't. Remind yourself that caregiving is tremendously challenging and that you are doing the best you can to make your relative feel safe, comfortable, secure, and cared for.

As a caregiver you may have to make some important decisions about your loved one's care – whether or not he should be moved to a nursing home, continue to live alone, is capable of managing his finances. Discuss the situation with friends, family members, financial or health professionals. Ask for their advice and opinions about your loved one's capabilities. Keep in mind that it is your responsibility as his caregiver to make decisions about care when he or she can no longer do so. Trust yourself to make the best choices for your relative – and don't second-guess yourself.

"LET A SMILE BE YOUR UMBRELLA"

For people with Alzheimer's and their caregivers there will be good days and not-so-good days especially as the disease progresses. Some days you might be angry. If you are – be angry at the disease – not the person with the disease.

Take each day as it comes. Make the most of your parent's good days. Put the bad days behind you. Look for humor wherever you can find it – don't miss the comics in the newspaper.

Contact the Area Agency on Aging and Disabilities of Southwest Washington at 360-694-8144 or IAClark@dshs.wa.gov to learn more about supports available to family caregivers. Article content is provided by Active Daily Living.