PENNSYLVANIA PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

Self-Care for Caregivers

Evan Cobb, M.A.

Taking care of your health isn't always easy, especially when you're responsible for someone else's well-being. This may be the case when your day-to-day responsibilities involve caring for a dependent family member. But just because someone else needs extra help doesn't mean you should ignore your own needs. A recent report by AARP revealed that 1 in 4 U.S. adults (sixty-three million people) are family caregivers assisting loved ones in need. Since caregiving is such a common occurrence, what does research say about self-care for those who care for others?

Caregiving Is Hard Work

It's clear that caregiving takes a toll on caregivers over time: nearly 1 in 4 caregivers report difficulties caring for themselves, 1 in 4 feel isolated or alone, 2 in 3 report high emotional stress, and around half of them report physical strain. In fact, caregiving is such a common source for ongoing hardship that it is used as a model for research studies on the health effects of chronic stress. Research highlights these common stressors related to caregiving:

- Care recipient's behavior, functional disabilities, cognitive impairment
- Demanding tasks (e.g., lifting, toileting, chores, errands)
- Constant supervision/vigilance
- Work/life balance
- Family conflict
- Financial troubles

Because of these often chronic stressors, caregivers are subject to increased rates of physical and psychological disorders, irritability, feelings of isolation and withdrawal, and unhealthy behaviors that can have serious or even fatal consequences.

Caring for Yourself Is Important

Despite these challenges, caring for others can be very rewarding when a healthy, balanced lifestyle is maintained. There are simple and practical ways to maintain this balance of care. Regardless of the people you care for, here are some tips to take care of yourself:

- Education - Learn as much as you can about your care recipient's needs and how to meet them as efficiently as possible. This will increase your ability to provide the care they need while minimizing your own risk of burnout.

- Healthy habits - Make sure you take time to eat and sleep well, get appropriate exercise, and take guilt-free time away from the caregiving role. This will provide you with increased energy and alertness, reduced tension, and overall improvement in your physical and mental health.

- Social support - Stay connected to family, friends, and broader support systems such as faith-based communities. These relationships can provide you with various types of support (emotional, informational, problem-solving) as well as decreasing your stress level and your sense of isolation.

- Psychotherapy - Consider talking to a licensed mental health professional for additional support. These professionals can pinpoint existing strengths and support systems, encourage healthy lifestyle changes in behavior, and provide valuable insights to community resources. Targeted therapy techniques like Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and Mindfulness-Based Interventions (MBI) can be especially effective at reducing the psychological distress associated with caregiving.

Additional Resources

Caregivers provide support which would otherwise cost the healthcare industry hundreds of billions of dollars every year. It's a very tough job, but fortunately, there are numerous organizations available to help. Here are some resources for caregivers that might lessen the load:

- The Family Caregiver Alliance and Caregiver Action Network provide resources and forums for caregivers on their online platforms
- PA Navigate and The U.S. Administration on Aging's Eldercare Locator are online tools that connect caregivers to local services in their state
- The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) provides free and confidential support for family, friends, and caregivers of people with mental health challenges. Call their Family Caregiver Helpline at 1-800-950-NAMI (6264) and press 4; Text "FAMILY" to 62640, or email them at helpline@nami.org. You can also check out their free educational programs for caregivers and interested others.

Talk to someone who can help! To find a licensed psychologist near you, use PPA's Psychologist Locator at https://www.papsy.org/locator. For information on other mental health topics, go to https://www.papsy.org, then "Resources" and then "Public Resources". PPA offers these articles for informational purposes only; they are not a substitute for professional diagnosis and treatment.