



NLLRC Staff 8/2015

Caregiving can be a tough and stressful job. It is a role that is often unrecognized and can feel thankless. It requires great levels of physical, emotional and mental strength. A caregiver is usually an unpaid family member or friend. According to AARP statistics, the estimated value of caregivers was \$375 billion in 2007 (1). That number will only grow as the population continues to age. While stressful, caregiving can be a very rewarding experience. Providing care to an individual that you love can be an opportunity to treasure. It is important to note that you must care for yourself as well in order to provide a good quality of care to your loved one.

This fact sheet will explore ways to help you manage your stress. Make note of how you might fit these de-stressing activities into your life. Think of activities that you enjoy and how you might fit them in as well.

Organize your life

- **Recognize what you have control over and what you do not.** Try to avoid allowing yourself to worry or stress about something that is out of your control. Use that energy on something more productive, such as a project or task in which you are in control of the outcome.
- **Write down and prioritize your daily routine.** Get rid of anything unnecessary.
- **Be flexible.** When something happens that is out of your control, be flexible and change priorities.
- **Organize your loved one's financial, legal and medical records.** They should be easily accessible and in an order that makes sense to you and to your loved one. Having these materials readily available in case of an emergency can reduce stress.
- **Keep important information within reach.** Post lists of phone numbers, medicines and other important information where they are easily accessed. Consider keeping this document handy with a pocket magnet on the refrigerator or even inside your refrigerator.
- **Know your limits.** Taking on more than you can handle will increase your stress level.

Eat a well-balanced diet

- **Be mindful of your eating habits.** Eat a diet with plenty of fruits, vegetables and whole grains. Be aware of over (or under) eating and mindless snacking.
- **Prepare meals in advance.** Consider preparing extra portions when you cook. You can freeze the extras and use them for quick, ready-to-eat meals. If you are short on ideas for how to cook extra portions, try searching the Internet for quick, pre-planned meal menus. You will find Web sites that offer recipes to make meals in bulk and often include a shopping list as well!
- **Avoid convenience foods.** While fast food is convenient when you are short on time, it is important to consider that your body needs nutrients that you will not get from a pizza or a burger and fries.
- **Drink plenty of water.** Your body needs to rehydrate, and water is the healthiest way to do so.
- **Limit your caffeine intake.** Caffeine can negatively impact your sleep, among other things. Instead of reaching for a cup of coffee to get you through the afternoon, try reaching for a healthy snack. Snack on an apple, have a glass of water, or take a quick walk instead.

Get enough rest and sleep

- **Get a good night's rest.** Lack of sleep can take a significant toll on your body and mind. In addition to higher rates of depression, “growing evidence shows that a chronic lack of sleep increases your risk of obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular disease and infections (2).”
- **Keep a regular sleep schedule.** If possible, try to go to bed around the same time each night to get your body on a schedule.
- **Limit caffeinated or alcoholic beverages in the evenings.** While you may feel that a drink in the evening helps you to fall asleep, the quality of your sleep actually diminishes with alcohol.
- **Limit your exposure to screens before bedtime.** Screens include television, computer, tablet and/or phone. In addition to confusing your brain with the brightness of the screens, television programs, Facebook threads and text messages can cause undue stress when you are trying to rest.
- **Meditate.** Consider doing a meditative exercise like deep breathing as a routine before bed.
- **Communicate.** Talk with your doctor about your sleep habits. Your doctor cannot know how to help you if he or she does not know about the problem.

Monitor your physical health and exercise regularly

- **Schedule a checkup.** Schedule and keep regular appointments and checkups with your doctors. Ask yourself, “How can I help my loved one if I am not caring for myself?”
- **Increase your physical activity.** This does not mean spending hours in the gym. Consider activities you enjoy and incorporate those activities in your day-to-day life. Take a walk, swim or spend time in your garden. Take 15 minutes for yourself and stop at a park to walk around on your way home. Think of those 15 minutes as a time to decompress and recharge your batteries and get back to the task at hand when you are finished.
- **Combine exercise with time to catch up with friends.** It is easy to make the excuse that you do not have time to exercise or meet with friends. Ask your friend to meet you at the park for a walk and use that time to catch up and remind yourself that you have an identity outside of being a caregiver.
- **Stretch.** Stretching is free and can be done anywhere. Take a couple of minutes to stretch your whole body, starting from your head and working down to your toes. That little break will release tension in your muscles and allow you to refocus.
- **Take a walk.** A 2005 study found that “walking fast for 35 minutes a day five times a week or 60 minutes three times a week had a significant influence on mild to moderate depression symptoms (3).”

Monitor your emotional health

- **Check-in with yourself.** Ask yourself about how you are coping emotionally. Caregivers often neglect their responsibility to care for themselves. Your emotional health is important, and can take a big toll on your body.
- **Share your feelings.** Instead of bottling up your stress and emotions, express yourself with someone you know and trust. If you are struggling to find someone you trust to unload your feelings onto, consider talking with a counselor.
- **Keep a journal.** You can both express and monitor your feelings by keeping a log for yourself. You can use this journal as a tool to track your habits. If you notice more entries about lack of sleep or an increase in feelings of anxiety or overwhelming feeling of dread and sadness, call your healthcare provider or consider making a change!
- **Know your limits.** You lose your ability to problem-solve and address issues when there is too much on your plate to handle.

- **Add in a calming exercise.** Learn calming exercises, such as deep breathing and meditation. Try a deep breathing exercise or a stretching and relaxation exercise when you feel stressed. You can search for quick calming exercises on the Internet or try a yoga class. When you feel your stress level increasing, try taking a few deep breaths. A deep breath should be felt in your belly. Inhale slowly through your nose, and exhale out of your mouth. Try this a few times, counting as you inhale and exhale.
- **Take up an activity that offers emotional satisfaction.** This activity can give you time away to focus on yourself and give you a break from your situation. If you like to drive, try making a playlist of your favorite songs to jam out to and hit the road! Spend a few minutes dancing with your loved one. What better way to de-stress than to laugh with those you love? If you prefer a more calming activity, try taking a nature walk or carving out time and space to read a book.
- **Do not self-medicate with alcohol, work or drugs.** While these activities add a distraction, they are just that. You will cause yourself more harm than good.
- **Spend some time with your four-legged friends.** Studies have shown that pet therapy can reduce stress and anxiety, and improve mental and physical health (4).
- **Know the common signs of depression.** Learn to recognize the common signs of depression in yourself. Common signs of depression include loss of appetite, sleeplessness, irritability, crying, inability to concentrate and forgetfulness. If you find yourself experiencing these symptoms, contact your healthcare provider for a referral to a mental health professional.

Know your resources and accept help from others

- **Take a break.** Use your family, friends, church and local organizations to arrange to take a break. Contact your local Office on Aging, Aging and Disability Resource Network, or Center for Independent Living to determine whether there is a respite program in your area. Meals on Wheels might be an option to ensure the individual you are caring for has a hot meal delivered at lunch time, which can free you up to do other things.
- **Let others help you with general tasks.** Keep a list of common chores and jobs and show it to those who offer to help.
- **Be clear in your request for help.** What, specifically, do you need help with? Is it mowing the lawn, preparing meals or just sitting with your loved one while you do the grocery shopping?
- **Know that you are not alone.** If you feel you are in a place to do so, consider joining a caregiver support group.

Set aside time to care for yourself

- **You deserve time away.** Accept that it is perfectly fine to do things that you enjoy. Take time for yourself at least once per week. If you're able to take more time, even just a few minutes per day, do so.
- **Accept help.** If people offer to help, accept it.
- **Reward yourself.** This does not have to mean spending money on an expensive spa day. Try treating yourself to a movie or a dinner date. The work that you do is important and valuable. You deserve a treat.
- **Nurture your spiritual self.** If your spirituality is important to you, nurture that relationship. Be sure to do what makes you feel connected to your spirituality. Attend services, speak with your church leaders, pray or participate in a church group.
- **Recognize the significance of your role as caregiver.** Your role has positive meaning, and you can be made stronger through it.

Caregiving Resources

- Amputee Coalition NLLRC Resources for Specific Groups: Caregivers
amputee-coalition.org/limb-loss-resource-center/resources-for-specific-groups/caregivers
- Caregiver Action Network
caregiveraction.org
- Eldercare Locator
eldercare.gov/eldercare.net/public/resources/topic/Caregiver.aspx
- Family Caregiver Alliance
caregiver.org
- Medicare.gov Caregiver Resource Kit
medicare.gov/campaigns/caregiver/caregiver-resource-kit.html
- Medicare.gov Caregiver Resources
medicare.gov/campaigns/caregiver/caregiver.html
- National Alliance for Caregiving
caregiving.org
- National Caregivers Library
caregiverslibrary.org
- National Council on Independent Living
ncil.org
- USA.gov Caregiver Resources
usa.gov/Citizen/Topics/Health/caregivers.shtml

References

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AARP
aarp.org/relationships/caregiving/info-11-2008/i13_caregiving.html
2. “Your Guide to Healthy Sleep”
nhlbi.nih.gov/health/resources/sleep/healthy-sleep
3. “Exercise and Depression”
Harvard Health
health.harvard.edu/mind-and-mood/exercise-and-depression-report-excerpt
4. “Psychosocial and Psychophysiological Effects of Human-Animal Interactions: The Possible Role of Oxytocin”
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