

CAREGIVER HEALTH ISSUES

by Hanni Epp, MA

Linda's story...

“Dad has been living with us for two years now. At first, he was pretty cheerful and easy to care for. These days, it's hard to fit in all the care he needs, and he seems critical of everything I do. I feel irritated at the slightest thing, I'm exhausted, and I can't concentrate on my work. How am I to continue? --Linda S.”

Linda is a 47-year-old woman with a family, a high-school degree, a full-time job and a household income of \$35,000. She is also her father's caregiver, and is feeling overwhelmed. Linda has no particular training in health care. Sometimes she doesn't feel well herself.

A word about caregiver strain...

About one third of caregivers describe their own health as “fair to poor”. A recent American Medical Association article states that 16% of caregivers report that their health has worsened since taking on the caregiver role, and about half of caregivers who care for someone with Alzheimer's disease develop psychological distress.

Caregiver strain and stress associated with family caregiving can result in increased risks of infectious diseases such as colds and flu, and chronic diseases such as heart disease, diabetes and cancer. Further signs of stress include burnout, self neglect, excessive use of drugs or alcohol, depression,

abuse and neglect of their loved one, and premature institutional placement of the patient.

What contributes to physical and emotional strain experienced by many family caregivers?

- Chronic stress in never knowing what challenge will come next
- Barriers to self-care, such as lack of time, lack of respite care, depression, guilt and denial
- External pressures such as lack of transportation, insufficient finances
- Internal stress that comes with providing care to a chronically ill relative

Kate's story...

Dr. Cheryl Woodson, a geriatrician in Chicago Heights, Ill., says "...most people, they just get worn out...they are trying to do what it takes three shifts of maybe three people to do in a nursing home." Here's just one story:

"Kate" had been her mother's primary caregiver for four years when she made an appointment to see a therapist. She worked as an office administrator and enjoyed her job – in this economy, she was grateful to have it. Lately, her job reviews had been slipping, and Kate was called in by her supervisor. She was told that there had been complaints by her colleagues about her many phone calls, her absences and her tardiness. Her supervisor told Kate that she would have to improve her performance if she wanted to keep her job. Kate found herself crying all the time, binge eating and having trouble sleeping. She was in trouble, and she knew it.

A word about depression...

One of the major health challenges faced by caregivers is depression. One study found that middle-aged and older women who provided care for an ill or disabled spouse were almost six times as likely to suffer depressive or anxious symptoms, as were those who had no caregiving responsibilities. Also, women who cared for ill parents were twice as likely to suffer from depressive or anxious symptoms as noncaregivers.

Although it is a major health concern for caregivers, the good news is that depression is highly treatable. Proper screening is the first step to wellness. For an informal depression screening survey, click on the “Personal Wellbeing Survey” link at (www.caregiverresource.net). If your score indicates that you may benefit from professional help, you may wish to click on “Local Programs” for information about services available in your area.

Easing the burden...lessons learned

At a Town Hall meeting in Washington, DC in December, 2003, three caregivers delivered testimonies of their caregiving experiences, and discussed the positive impact that self-care activities have on their quality of life. Here are some of the things they shared:

- It is as necessary to care for the caregiver as it is to care for a loved one
- Get adequate rest and exercise

- Eat healthy, nourishing foods - regularly
- Have a sense of humor
- Do not be ashamed to ask for help.
- Seek balance in your life as a caregiver by taking time out for your own needs and interests
- Consider joining a support group. Such groups can be extremely valuable in providing a safe place to share personal experiences and feelings with others who are in similar circumstances.
- Recognize when you are no longer able to care for your loved one.

Additional suggestions that can help ease a family caregiver's burden and promote better health and self care follow:

- Use the opportunity when taking a loved one to the doctor to address concerns and ask questions about your own health
- Prevent adverse health by getting immunized and obtaining routine screenings
- Do not try to do everything yourself! Ask for help from others and use local resources such as the Caregiver Resource Network (1-888-456-5664), or Eldercare Locator (1-800-677-1116)
- Seek out quality respite services in your area. Family caregivers need to have a break from their pressing challenges, and get some much needed time to themselves

Last thoughts...

Linda and Kate's situations are typical of the country's unpaid caregivers – two of the many who provide an estimated 80% of the day-to-day care the chronically ill receive. If the care given by Linda and Kate and the other 25 million caregivers had to be replaced by paid home health care staff, the cost to the nation is estimated to range from \$45 to \$200 billion annually.

The caregivers who testified in Washington, DC, said it best:

“Do not ignore your own health. If it is poor, acknowledge it. If you do not take care of yourself, in the long run, you will not be able to be a good caregiver for someone else.”

We can't afford to lose a single caregiver – their service is priceless!

More resources

If you want more information about resources, the Caregiver Resource Network can help. The Network's web-page (www.caregiverresource.net) can provide you with information about programs and services, fact sheets, and a questionnaire about caregiver strain. Or call Area Agency on Aging of Western Michigan (616) 456.5664, or (888) 456.5664.

If you have a question you would like to see addressed in a future article, feel free to contact Hanni Epp at: Caregiver's Corner, West Michigan Caregivers Alliance, 233 E. Fulton, Ste. 222, Grand Rapids, MI 49503, or e-mail at Hanni@wmichcare.com.

References:

American Medical Association www.ama-assn.org.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services www.aspe.hhs.gov

Column written by Hanni Epp, MA, therapist and consultant in private practice at West Michigan Caregivers Alliance. She is also a member of Caregiver Resource Network, a partnership of West Michigan organizations dedicated to providing information and support for family and professional caregivers within the community. Be sure to look for the Caregiver's Corner in the next edition of *Mature Lifestyles*.