

Caregiver's Corner Column (June 2011)

Healthy Aging for Family Caregivers

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Healthy aging is important to living a good quality and enjoyable senior life. Seniors and their caregivers need to invest in their lives physically, socially, mentally, and financially. In 2009, Healthy Aging, a National initiative to help individuals think more positively about growing older, was established.

Approximately 44 million Americans age eighteen and older provide care assistance to seniors and adults with disabilities. Taking care of a chronically ill family member is hard, even if one chooses to be a caregiver. One-third of the caregiver population provides care even though they are not in good health themselves. Many problems such as depression, high-stress, and financial strain can develop. Caregivers are at risk for chronic illness, have an increased risk of heart disease, tend to take poor care of themselves, don't eat properly, or see their physicians when they should.

Caregivers need to take good care of themselves to improve their health and to be able to be an effective caregiver to a family member. Think of it as your lesson on using oxygen on an airplane before take-off. You need to strap the oxygen on yourself before trying to help someone else. To not heed this wise advice could result in your passing out and not being able to help anyone else. So too must it be for caregivers. Here you will find some helpful information to ensure a caregiver is securing enough "oxygen":

Physical Health:

Eat properly. There are many resources in the community that can help you learn how to get proper nutrition. Be creative about your approach to getting this good nutrition. For example, you can eat smaller meals more often when you have a chance to eat. This entails keeping healthy food in the house. Simple sandwiches can be made ahead of time, cut in half, and put in the refrigerator. It is easy to grab one of these healthy sandwich halves and eat it in between giving care to your family member or client. Keep fruit and yogurt on hand.

Exercise: One of the most common excuses I hear from caregivers is that they are so busy being a caregiver they don't have the time to exercise. Exercise is important to keeping up your own strength, keeping healthy, maintaining a good weight, and helps to reduce stress.

Preventative Care:

It is essential that seniors and their caregivers have annual physicals, keep doctor appointments (if you need to reschedule, do so promptly and follow-through). For women, having regular mammograms and annual pap smears is very important. If your physician prescribes medication to you, follow his/her instructions.

Mental and Emotional Health:

Studies have shown that caregivers show higher levels of depression. Estimates of 40-70% of caregivers have clinically significant symptoms of depression. There are many resources in our community that may help. In addition, make time to meet with a friend or take part in a place of worship. Faith communities can lend support and build your spiritual health.

Explore what resources are available to you, the person you are caring for, and your family. You may want to learn about Dealing with Caregiver Stress, Counseling Services, Recreational Therapy, Alzheimer's disease, Dementia Care, Dealing with Resistance, coping with Chronic Disease, and valuable Respite Services. One way to do this is to join a caregiver support group, where you will also have a chance to meet other people who are caregivers, which can be highly beneficial. Taking care of your self can ensure good health for both you and the person who you are providing care. For information on available local resources, including support groups, consult the Caregiver Resource Network website at: www.caregiverresource.net.

Caregiver's Corner is provided as a public service of the **Caregiver Resource Network**. The Caregiver Resource Network is a collaboration of West Michigan organizations dedicated to providing for the needs and welfare of family and professional caregivers within the community. Funded by the Area Agency on Aging of Western Michigan with Older American's Act Title III-E, Family Caregiver Support funds. For more information consult our website at www.CaregiverResource.net or call toll free at 1-888-456-5664.