

CARING FOR YOURSELF

- HEALTH, FITNESS AND NUTRITION

by Hanni Epp, MA

Darlene writes: “Mom has Alzheimer’s disease and has been living in our home for the last four years. She needs help with almost everything now, and I’m feeling exhausted. I want to give her my best care; but I often lose patience with her, or catch myself feeling resentful. I’ve just got to do something different, but how? Mom’s care takes up all my time now – there’s no time for me.”

About Darlene. . .

Darlene lives with her husband Jack and their daughter Katy. Darlene works part-time in the evenings, and Jack is employed full-time (on day shift). Katy is a junior in high school and works part-time at a local pizza parlor.

Before her Mom moved in, Darlene was walking with friends every day, and prided herself on her cooking. The family had weekly “fun time” together, too. None of this seems to be happening now; and Darlene is feeling isolated from her friends, and trapped in a routine she hadn’t planned for.

What Are the Issues?

Family caregivers are often so focused on caring for their loved ones that they neglect their own health. The consequent weight changes, headaches, anxiety, depression and insomnia have resulted in a two to three times increase in the use of prescription drugs in caregivers than in the general population.

Proper self-care could help prevent many of these health problems or at least reduce their severity. But persuading caregivers to look after their physical and emotional well-being takes work. To paraphrase Darlene: “All my time is Mom’s –

there's no time for me right now.”

You may be a caregiver by choice or by circumstance: but you have stood by the care receiver out of love and respect for that person. You owe yourself no less! And that same love and respect is best expressed by looking after your own health.

Where Do We Start?

We have to become **aware** of the consequences of self-neglect before we can change. In this section I'll talk about four areas of self-care: regular exercise, good nutrition, adequate sleep and minimal stress. (We'll discuss solutions below.)

Let's begin by talking about **stress**. We've discussed stress management in this column before, so I won't go into great detail. Here an important point to think about:

- stress is not triggered by any given situation, but by our *perception* of a situation.

Here's the real message to take home:

- the more intense a situation, the greater the potential for real physiological damage.
- Surveys have found that between 70 to 80% of doctor visits are stress-related.

Let's talk now about **regular exercise**. If you are a caregiver (and if you are reading this you are one, or you know one), working out can quickly disappear off the bottom of your to-do list. Yet exercise can:

- Reduce stress
- Reduce the risk of certain cancers

- Protect against type 2 diabetes
- Lower blood pressure and cholesterol
- Slow bone loss, sharpen memory
- Enhance sleep, digestion and sexual function.

Oh yes, it's also great for weight loss. The real question here is can you afford NOT to exercise?

OK, now let's talk about **nutrition**. Caregivers often skip meals altogether or make unhealthy food choices. Eating healthfully is beneficial for *both* mind and body.

Here's what you are giving up for the sake of convenience:

- The right foods in the right amounts can help protect against heart disease, cancer, diabetes and osteoporosis
- Some of the nutrients (in the right foods/right amounts) restock your body's energy supply; others are used to boost mood and mental performance.

For more information on problems associated with an unhealthy diet, see the article by Lucia Yeager elsewhere in this issue of *Mature Lifestyles*.

A major health problem many caregivers face is inadequate or interrupted **sleep**. Inadequate sleep can often be helped by improved nutrition and exercise, along with reduced stress. When a loved one's requirements for help or wandering behavior are the cause for sleep disturbance, the solution is more complicated. Finding family members or friends willing to spend the night tends to be very difficult.

This situation must be placed at the top of the priority list for attention. At the least, sleep deprivation causes fatigue, resulting in discouragement and moodiness. Very quickly the caregiver also risks becoming ill while the quality of care becomes seriously compromised.

What's next...?

We've talked about awareness of the issues. Now it's time to put that awareness into practice! Here we go!

How do we reduce stress? The #1 way is to find support.

- If family members or friends have said they're willing to help, take them up on their offer. Offer a choice of specific tasks they can handle: staying with your loved one an afternoon or two each week, running some errands or taking on a few household chores.
- Check into community resources for assistance, as well. Help is available, but you must be willing to ask!
- Look for ways to achieve deep relaxation. Try a comfortably warm bath, getting a massage, or practice deep breathing for on-the-spot stress relief.
- Remember to take one day or one minute at a time. When we focus on the past or worry about the future, we lose the energy we need to be present in the moment.
- Time and energy are precious. Know your limits and be willing to delegate some tasks and say no to others.

What about exercise? Experts tell us to move our bodies at least 30 minutes every day. Walking, running, climbing stairs, cycling or swimming are great. But how about taking a nonstop lap around the inside of the mall or supermarket before you start shopping? Or, putter in the garden whenever you get a chance (very therapeutic for mind and body). Divvy up household chores to one or two each day – think of them as workouts rather than just plain work.

- Ask your doctor for some safe stretching exercises. Stretching preserves flexibility and protects against injury.
- Consider strength training. A small investment in equipment and/or training can pay off with lowered blood pressure, lowered blood sugar and uplifted mood. Some experts say lifting for just 20 minutes two or three times a week produces good results.

Strength training can build the necessary muscle to perform physically challenging tasks like helping a loved one out of a chair. And, how's this for an added bonus? Researchers at Tufts University found that women who engaged in strength training lost 44 percent more body fat than women who didn't, even though all of them were following the same diet.

- A caregiver who cannot get out of the house may benefit from a stationary bike, aerobic tapes or CDs, or tension-releasing exercises which can be done while the loved one is sleeping. Many exercises can be performed while sitting in a chair, talking on the phone, or watching television.

After a caregiver begins to incorporate exercise as part of her/his daily routine, the benefits of feeling more energetic and less tense tend to outweigh the time taken away from other duties.

Taking action to eat healthfully. For caregivers, sticking with the basics is simplest and best. Use the USDA's new Food Guide Pyramid to help plan. Here are a few tips to start:

- Make time for a healthy breakfast, such as oatmeal or low-sugar cereal with nonfat milk and fruit.
- Eat at least 5 servings of fruits and vegetables daily. Buy pre-cut produce to save

time, and have ready snacks.

- Increase fiber intake to 25-35 grams per day. The best sources are whole grains and beans.
- Drink at least 8 – 8 oz. glasses of water a day. Really!

If taking time to prepare food is the real problem, consider these tips:

- Cook two entrees at a time, and freeze one, ready to reheat.
- Purchase frozen vegetables to add to pasta and chicken or ham to prepare a quick stir-fry.
- Preparing a large pot of soup needn't be difficult. Use soup starters and be creative with ingredients on hand. Add a sandwich or a salad to create a full meal. The best part is that you can freeze the leftovers to reheat another day.

Sleep, sleep, sleep! Caregivers have an amazing ability to stretch their days to accommodate the extra work they have taken on. One study focusing specifically on people caring for cancer patients found lost sleep to be a factor in raising the caregivers' risk of depression. It also impairs memory and motor skills, which can affect a caregiver's ability to perform certain tasks.

- Try to get 8 hours sleep each night, and keep a regular schedule of going to bed and getting up.
- If you need a nap, limit your time to 20 minutes or less. Avoid napping too close to bedtime.
- There are many more good suggestions to help you. Contact the National Sleep Foundation for guidance on getting a good night's sleep. Call (202) 347-3471 or visit www.sleepfoundation.org.

Last thoughts...

Self-care might seem like a luxury to many caregivers. But once you learn to nurture yourselves, you will find you will be even better prepared — physically and emotionally - to nurture others.

References:

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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.

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 collaboration 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*.