

Recognizing Caregiver Stress

by Hanni Epp, MA

Elizabeth reports:

“When Aunt Katherine called for the 8th time yesterday, I blew my stack! I’d been trying to get some work done at home, and was having trouble concentrating. All she wanted was to know when to take her medicine.” --Elizabeth B.

It may just be a simple request, but piled on top of many, it could be enough to send you over the edge. While we may not be able to see stress, or even the damage it causes, over time we will feel its presence. It’s been found that 70 – 80 percent of doctor visits are stress-related.

Here’s the good news: getting irritated at Aunt Katherine may be a blessing in disguise, telling you that you are going on overload, and some changes are needed. Read on...

More about Elizabeth...

Elizabeth is a 69-year-old woman living with her husband, John, in a comfortable condominium. She is a retired teacher and used to volunteer as a tutor at the local library. Until recently she and her husband had enjoyed the “senior education” offerings of the local colleges, going to concerts and visiting with their friends. Life had fallen into a pretty comfortable pattern and they were feeling happy and relaxed in retirement.

Both Elizabeth and John’s parents had died over a period of the last 12 years. Aunt Katherine was the last of her generation and Elizabeth, her closest living relative, had committed to care for her. Although Aunt Katherine desperately wanted to continue living

independently, her daily needs were growing to a point where Elizabeth was feeling overwhelmed and exhausted. When she snapped at her Aunt, she was shocked at her own response – and felt very guilty and ashamed.

Elizabeth had been trying to care for her household, as well as Aunt Katherine's, in addition to attending to her Aunt's personal needs. Most of her "outside" activities had fallen away. Recently she was feeling lonely and couldn't even think who to call – it had been so long since she'd seen any of her friends.

Signs of Stress: First Signals...

The National Alliance for Caregiving has identified several warning signs of excess stress.

- Reduced attention span and concentration
- Constant irritability or dulled emotions
- Stomach problems
- Withdrawal from regular activities
- Difficulty sleeping

These and other symptoms may be signals that you are on overload, and you may want to seek professional help. You can already see that Elizabeth is experiencing three of the five symptoms in this short list, and there may be others.

Our natural physical response to stress includes increased heart rate, raised blood pressure, tightened muscles and sharpened senses. Our body has been put on alert, ready to take action. This helps us to perform at our peak and works to our advantage in specific crisis situations.

For the unrelenting stress experienced by some caregivers, however, it can seriously undermine their health. Severe consequences include taxing the cardiovascular system, suppressing the immune system and disrupting sleep.

According to a study published in the December issue of the Journal of the American Medical Association, caregivers who provide support to their elderly spouse and are under stress are more than twice as likely to die within 4 years, than spouses who are not serving as caregivers. This is an alarming statistic, since the caregiving “career” can last for much longer than that.

An equally alarming concept is that lack of self-care can result in both loved one and caregiver becoming care recipients, leaving the loved one without a caregiver, forced into a type and level of care that no one planned or wished for.

For a more extensive survey on stress levels, go the Caregiver Resource Web Site www.caregiverresource.net, and click on Caregiver Self-Assessment, or for a 10-point stress survey you may contact me at (616) 235-8501, or by e-mail at hanni@wmichcare.com.

Making the difference...

Here’s the one important point about stress that can make a difference. It’s not the caregiving (or any other) situation that triggers stress – it’s our perception of the situation! What does that mean? It means that we all have different tolerance levels in our ability to cope physically, mentally and emotionally. We want to continue to be responsible and compassionate caregivers, and so it is up to us to recognize our own tolerance level, and to

accept the idea that we need help. In fact, opening up to others and asking for their help can be stressful, too.

Since many caregivers are accustomed to doing things on their own, consider starting off with...

- Practicing good stress management techniques. For example, on-the-spot stress relief can be achieved by practicing deep breathing. A method recommended by Andrew Weil, MD. asks you to simply inhale for a count of four, hold for a count of four then exhale for a count of four, holding again for a count of four. You may substitute a favorite phrase or prayer for the count, if you wish. Repeat three times, and you should notice a difference in your stress level. Other ideas for activities include deep relaxation techniques such as taking a warm bath, getting a massage, taking a walk.
- Maintaining an exercise program. Caregivers often tell me that working out is just not on their agenda. Yet, exercise not only can reduce stress, it can also minimize symptoms of depression which occurs in greater proportion among caregivers than in the general population. Exercise also lowers blood pressure and cholesterol, slows bone loss, sharpens memory and enhances sleep, digestion and sexual function. The main benefit is to keep you functioning as the best caregiver possible.

Deep breathing, deep relaxation and exercise are all brief respites, which can change your view of a situation. Remember that it's your perception of the situation, not the situation itself, that leads to stress.

For more on good stress management techniques, please contact me at (616) 235-8501, or by e-mail at hanni@wmichcare.com. And next, begin to reach out to others by...

- Finding a support group to attend. The group can help you to manage some of the emotions that come up with caregiving (yes, it's normal to be angry at times!). They can help you to give yourself permission to get assistance, and they can help you to connect to community resources.
- Enlist friends and family members to help. Perhaps someone could stay with your loved one an afternoon or two every week, to give you a break. Someone else may be willing to run a few errands or take on a few household chores. Even people who live further away can contribute financially or take on making some phone calls.

By reaching out to others, you are enriching the life of your loved one and the helper, as well as avoiding isolating yourself.

- Tap into Community Resources. A new study, as yet unpublished, shows that caregiver well being is directly impacted by the type and number of services accessed – which indirectly benefits the care recipient. Services that impacted the most were: transportation, counseling services, ADL assistance (Activities of Daily Living, such as bathing and dressing) and prescription assistance, in that order. Other services impacted as well, but these four had the highest rating in the study.

Last thoughts...

Just as we advocate for our loved one's care, we must learn to become aware and to advocate for ourselves. Elizabeth and all of us will find that if we take the time to nurture ourselves, we'll have the physical, mental and emotional stamina to provide care for our loved ones.

References:

www.thoushalthonor.org

And Thou Shalt Honor: the caregiver's companion. 2002. Edited by B.W. McLeod. St. Martin's Press.

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.