

Resolving caregiver stress

We often think of family as a safe haven from stress, but family members can also cause stress. Stress is pressure from the outside, making tension on the inside. Stress can change the way you feel, think and act, without you even being aware that it is doing harm. When stress is added to a fragile situation, the trap for abuse can be set, ready to spring.

How might this happen to a caregiver?

In the U.S. today, the family is the main source of care for elderly relatives. People who care for themselves, their children, and their parents have many pressures on the outside also. The responsibility can seem immense. When caregivers see that parts of their lives have less attention, they may resent the additional work, time and energy that aging parents may cause. Caregivers may feel something is wrong with them because they are not living up to their self-imposed expectations. They may feel helpless and not know help is available.

Balance not easy

While children grow to need less care, older adults often grow to need more care. Finding the balance is not easy. Some needs start small, then grow until they are overwhelming. Emotionally, it is hard to see your parent need more help, more often. However, denial of the problem, anger and resentment do not help, and they hurt parents and adult children.

What is abuse of the elderly?

Likely abusers suffer from the stress of caring for a needy older person, from alcohol or drug problems, or their own emotional problems. Longer life spans, lack of health and social services, limited income, personal problems and unresolved resentment all set the stage for abuse to happen.

Abuse takes many forms of neglect and mistreatment including emotional withdrawal, physical beating, failure to give food or medicine properly, unsanitary living conditions, and financial exploitation. Some equally harmful psychological abuses are harassment, withholding companionship and unreasonable confinement.

Some people care for elderly relatives themselves,

in their own homes. Caregivers need to set realistic expectations for themselves and the one they care for. If someone else is caring for elderly relatives, report suspected cases of elder abuse to social service agencies or to the police.

Steps toward relieving caregiver stress

- **Talk it out.** Talk about problems before conflicts arise.
- **Make plans.** Plan free time to do something you enjoy each day.
- **Find resources.** Recognize and seek additional help when the caregiver or elderly person needs it.
- **Join a support group.** A church, synagogue, hospital or social worker can suggest one specific to your needs.
- **Know caregiver limitations.** Recognizing when caregivers need help is not an admission of failure. Finding help is preventing a failure.
- **Know where to get help.** Talk it over with people in the same situation. Or call or seek extra help (see below).

If you need help

Caregiving can seem to be a burden and a no-win situation, with extra responsibilities, stress and worry. If you are feeling overwhelmed, you may not be in a position to help your loved one. Talk things over with a friend, relative or clergy. Or talk to a counselor, whose objective viewpoint can help you sort things out. To make an appointment, call (810) 257-3742. In an emergency, call Crisis Services at (810) 257-3740 or toll free at or toll free at (877) 346-3648, where a counselor is available 24 hours a day. © www.genhs.org