

FAMILY CAREGIVER SUPPORT NETWORK FOR FAMILY MEMBERS AND FRIENDS WHO HELP OR CARE FOR OLDER ADULTS

Stress, Burden and Reward

- **Each caregiver's role is different based on who they are (husband, wife, son, daughter, or in-laws), what they are doing, how often and how long they have been caregiving.**

The caregiving experience changes people, but the parent is always the parent. While the caregiver may feel like they are now parenting the parent, it is really the change in roles. The daughter describes herself as the parent because she is now doing 'parent' like activities; shopping, feeding, laundry, bathing, finances. In reality the 'daughter' is now the caregiver.

- **Each caregiver has different experiences, needs, feelings, expectations, challenges and rewards.**

How a person responds to this new role will depend on how they feel about it, not just what needs to be done. If the son treasures time doing things for mom it will be rewarding. If his wife resents him being gone and “doing stuff for her”, it could be stressful – for everyone. If mom never took care of her children, past resentment may cause a problem. “Why should I care for the parent who never cared for me?” If a wife always “took care” of her husband and now the husband is doing everything she did, there can be a real sense of respect and love flowing from the wedding vows, “for better or worse”. Or conversely the spouse may feel robbed, resentful and “everything is a burden”.

While fitting the caregiving activities into daily routines can feel stressful, caregivers often describe their “caregiver stress” as being different from normal daily stress. Caregiver “burden” is the term Rhonda Montgomery, PhD has been using to best describe the different sense of stress caregivers feel. While many caregivers feel the term is negative and do not like to refer to their caregiving as “burdensome”, everyone is at a loss for a better word.

Caregiver burden or stress can cause physical, mental and relational problems. It can also cause death.

Understanding the source of the burden can help. Mary Brintnall-Peterson, PhD, an educator who helps put into practice the research of Dr. Montgomery, explains that there are three kinds of caregiver stress or burden, and if we understand where the stress comes from we have a better chance at reducing that stress and staying healthier.

The first kind is relationship stress or burden. It is stress that comes from the strain of the relationship between the caregiver and the care receiver. Perhaps the caregiver sees the recipient's request as too demanding. Perhaps there have been years of discontent and now it gets out of hand with more arguing and

bickering. Perhaps one person feels mom is really unsafe and mom tells him to leave her alone since he can't keep her safe, he feels stressed and guilty.

The second kind is objective stress or burden. This is when the caregiver just doesn't seem to be able to get everything done. There may be kids, grandkids, work, volunteer activities and hobbies. But juggling all the commitments is just getting to be too much. The relationships may be fine but there just isn't enough time or energy to meet all the other obligations.

The third kind is generalized stress or burden. This is caused by a caregiver's sense of anxiety or worry. The anxiety may be related to the caregiving experience, a specific task or how caregiving is affecting work or other relationships. It may be about a current situation or the future and the "what ifs".

So what can we do? To reduce relationship stress we may seek counseling, a support group or have a family meeting. We may also seek additional help that can change our role or place within the relationship. Objective stress may be able to be lessened by reducing the number of tasks we do. Again, one may need to ask for help. It is becoming well recognized by employers that it is better to offer help to a good employee than have them feel too stressed leading to mistakes or getting sick and needing more time off. (Only 30% of employees usually use their company's employee assistance programs.) Caregivers who persistently worry may want to learn about techniques that lower stress and prevent health problems.

Gaining a sense of control and feeling supported helps to reduce the feeling of burden and maintain health. The staff at Interfaith's Family Caregiver Support Program (FCSN) can help caregivers identify or talk about the stress and burdens of caregiving. Resource Specialists can help caregivers access services, find support and ultimately reduce the sense of isolation, frustration, stress and burden. Caregiving can be both difficult and rewarding but the caregiver needs to remain healthy. Please reach out if you are experiencing caregiver burden or stress **(414) 220-8600**.



Caregiver Support

Family Caregiver
SUPPORT NETWORK

(414) 220-8600

www.living-options.org

www.caregiversupportnetwork.org

www.interfaithmilw.org

