

Tips on Taking Care of Your Family During Stressful and Traumatic Events



Disasters and other traumatic events can disrupt the normal flow of life. The stress they cause can leave members of your family frightened, confused and insecure; whether they experience the event directly, see it on television, or hear about it from others. Relationship problems and difficulties with children can result from such stress.

Here are tips that can help your family manage stress and cope better.

- 📌 Spend time with your family and maintain familiar routines, such as family meals.
- 📌 Talk to your family and listen to what they have to say about their experiences.
- 📌 Accept that other family members' feelings and reactions to stressful and traumatic events may be different from yours.
- 📌 Give and ask for support from family members.
- 📌 Remind your family that things may not get back to normal immediately and that physically and emotionally healing takes time.
- 📌 Involve all family members in problem solving and coping with stressful situation.
- 📌 Take time to do fun things together.

YOUR CHILDREN

Children do not understand the world the same ways as adults do. After experiencing a traumatic event, they look to adults to explain what is happening and for guidance on what to do.

- 📌 Be aware of your children's normal reactions to stressful and traumatic events, so you can recognize them for what they are. These reactions can affect the way your children feel, think and behave. Their reactions vary depending on their age and understanding of what happened.
- 📌 Stay calm, as your reactions affect your children. If they see that you are extremely worried, it can make them feel afraid and insecure.
- 📌 Talk to your children about what happened, answer their questions in a way that they can understand, and let them express their feelings.
- 📌 Reassure your children about their safety and that they are in no way responsible for what happened.
- 📌 Limit their exposure to disturbing news and images by limiting the amount of television they watch and monitoring their internet access.

After experiencing a stressful or traumatic event:

Be patient with yourself and those around you.

Give everyone time to cope, adapt and heal.

The information in this tip sheet will help you understand what you can do to be better prepared to cope with stressful and traumatic events.

ELDERLY FAMILY MEMBERS

Traumatic events can be even more stressful for the elderly because of health concerns, worries about the future, and housing and financial security, among other things.

- Be patient if they seem confused or disoriented, as they may need further explanation and reassurance.
- Make sure that they are safe and that their basic personal and medical needs are addressed.
- Don't let them become socially isolated.
- Help them regain hope for the future by including them in the process of rebuilding your lives.

***If you or anyone
in your family
feels
overwhelmed –
reach out.
Help is available!***

TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

Take Care of Your Body

- Get enough sleep. Eat regular, healthy meals and be physically active.
- Avoid drinking excessively or using drugs or tobacco to help you cope.

Take Care of Your Emotional Health

- Do things that help you recharge and feel in control of your life. Set realistic goals for the future.
- Try to remain positive. Focus on your strengths and past accomplishments.
- Make time to reflect, meditate or pray.
- Save some time for participating in activities you enjoy.

Reach Out

- Do not be afraid to express your feelings or to talk about your experiences.
- Do not hesitate to ask for help if you feel overwhelmed or discouraged.
- Don't become isolated. Accept support - people do care!

Reduce Your Stress

- Do things you find comforting such as reading, listening to music, or exercising.
- During a disaster keep yourself informed by obtaining information from reliable resources, but do not become preoccupied with the news. Watching too much media coverage of the event can be upsetting to you and those others around you, including your children.

Manage Your Workload

- Maintain a healthy balance between work and rest.
- As you try to cope, do not let work take over your life.

KNOW WHEN AND WHERE TO FIND HELP

Most reactions to stress are transient, and most people recover with time and support. Stress reactions can appear immediately after the event or may not appear for weeks or even months. If the ***symptoms persist***, or if they ***worsen*** or ***interfere with daily functioning***, you should consider seeking professional help.

If you feel overwhelmed or are concerned about yourself or someone else, call **1-800 LIFENET**, a free, confidential helpline for New York City residents, available 24/7. Trained LifeNet staff are ready to take your calls.

1-800-LifeNet
1-800-543-3638
(English)

1-877-Ayudese
1-877-298-3373
(Spanish)

1-877-990-8585
(Chinese)

1-212-982-5284
(TTY)



The Stress of Family Caregiving: Your Health May Be at Risk

Tricia O'Brien

You have heard it before: If you are a family caregiver, you are at a greater health risk than your loved one. That's because by devoting yourself to the needs of someone else, you tend to neglect your own. You may not recognize, or you may ignore, the signs of illness, exhaustion, or depression that you are experiencing. But science has now proven what family caregiver advocates have talked about anecdotally for years: Providing care to someone you love — whether full-time, part-time, or long distance — takes a huge toll, both physically and emotionally.

When was the last time you stopped to think about yourself? "Caregivers often don't see themselves as being in a difficult situation," says Richard Schulz, Ph.D., a professor of psychiatry at the University of Pittsburgh who has studied the health effects of caregiving. "They know they are stressed, but they don't recognize the link between caregiving stresses and what they experience." Chances are, however, that your health is suffering from the stress you face.

A whole body of research now demonstrates the correlation between caregiving, stress, and poor health. In fact, caregivers reported chronic conditions at nearly twice the rate of non-caregivers (45 percent versus 24 percent), according to the Commonwealth Fund Biennial Health Insurance Survey.¹ Yet millions of family caregivers lack health insurance coverage and go without needed medical care.² Data from the National Center for



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Health Statistics cites that caregivers average just four doctor visits per year versus seven for their non-caregiver counterparts. You likely also suffer economic hardships from missing work or leaving your job to look after a spouse, parent, or other loved one, which adds to your stress load.

Are You at Risk?

It is now recognized that the stress of caregiving results in any number of long-term health effects for the family caregiver. These include:

Infectious diseases: Stress causes a cascade of physiological changes that weaken our immune system and, consequently, our overall health. Scientists at Ohio State University and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill specifically studied how stress impacts the immune systems of elderly caregivers by charting the levels of a substance called IL-6 (a protein of the cytokine family). Levels of IL-6 rise as an individual ages, and elevated levels hinder how our immune

system functions. The researchers found that the stress of caregiving caused IL-6 levels to increase four times as quickly in elderly caregivers as in the non-caregiving participants who were under less strain. This translates to a higher occurrence of infections and illnesses, putting caregivers at a greater risk for everything from colds and influenza to chronic diseases like heart disease, diabetes, and cancer.³

Depression: Family caregivers suffer from the symptoms of this condition at more than twice the rate of the general population.⁴ However, many of those caregivers with the most severe cases of depression don't recognize the typical symptoms of the condition in themselves, believing instead that their fatigue or loss of energy, irritability or agitation, and difficulty sleeping or concentrating are just part of being a family caregiver. Therefore, they don't seek help. Depressive symptoms are debilitating, and the disease itself is a risk factor for the chronic conditions noted above.

Sleep deprivation: A host of studies demonstrate that sleep deprivation is rampant in caregivers. In one such study, family caregivers who had a high level of responsibilities had a 51 percent incidence of sleeplessness.⁵ A lack of shut-eye can impair your ability to concentrate and perform at your job. New research is accumulating to show that sleep deprivation heightens your risk of a variety of major illnesses, heart disease, and obesity.

Premature aging: It's not uncommon to hear, "This stress is taking years off my life." But now research

led by Elissa Epel, M.D., at the University of California at San Francisco proves exactly how this happens on a cellular level. In a small study of mothers caring for their chronically ill children, Epel found that chronic stress accelerates the effects of aging by actually shortening cell life. It leads to weakened muscles, skin wrinkles, and even organ failure. The study noted that this type of severe stress can take as many as 10 years off a person's life.⁶

Higher mortality rate: Research led by Dr. Schulz found that elderly caregiving spouses who had experienced strain had a 63 percent higher risk of death compared to study par-

ticipants whose spouses did not need care. The study, which appeared in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, also found that one-third of stressed caregivers who had a severe chronic disease died within the study's four-year follow-up period.⁷

What Do These Studies Mean To You?

These findings mean that the cumulative effects of the stress of family caregiving are no laughing matter. They mean that all family caregivers really do need to start doing some things to reduce their stress or they — and their loved ones — are going to be in more difficult situations than they already are. Whatever you do, don't dismiss your feelings as "just stress." Dr. Schulz explains: "Self-care is very important, and there are a wide range of preventive health behaviors that caregivers tend to neglect. These include getting exercise, eating right, and having medical checkups on a regular basis."

Self-care, of course, is easier said than done. The last thing most family caregivers want is to walk into another doctor's office. Although we all know that we should get exercise, sometimes it feels as if there isn't even one extra ounce of energy left. So what's a family caregiver to do?

Step one is to remind yourself constantly that self-care is a necessity, not a luxury. Sooner or later you will start to believe it, and begin to make room for some healthful activities, reach out for help to lessen your load, or both. In the meantime, stay in touch with friends and family

members. Tell them what's going on in your life. Stress-reduction techniques like deep breathing can be done at intervals during the day. And don't forget humor. It really can help you cope. Pick up the phone and call that friend who always knows how to make you laugh, or carve out a half-hour for a silly television program.

Try to work in some time for exercise as well: It is an incredible stress-reduction tool, and research has found that caregivers who exercise regularly have less depression, anxiety, anger, stress, and lower blood pressure than caregivers who don't.⁸ You don't have to go to a gym to get good exercise. You can power walk around the house for 10 minutes. Don't seem to have the time or energy for 10 minutes? Start with five. The point is to believe that you really must do some things that are helpful and healthful or you will not be able to do anything at all.

This past November, NFCA launched ***The Caring Every Day Campaign*** with this underlying message: Believe in yourself. Protect your health. Reach out for help. The Campaign encourages family caregivers to take these three steps every day to make life easier and to improve the care you provide.

For more information on how you can care for yourself, go to www.thefamilycaregiver.org. Remember, the best way to ensure that you will continue to be there for your loved one is to take care of yourself. ■

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It Doesn't Go With The Territory

In case you believe that your physical symptoms are just part and parcel of your day-to-day caregiving, consider the following excerpt from a letter received from an NFCA member:

"Shortly after my husband died, I was rushed to the hospital, practically at death's door myself. It turns out that my body was almost completely depleted of potassium. When the doctors asked why I didn't realize how tired I was getting, I told them that I did realize it, but since I was working and taking care of my husband, I assumed that the tiredness just came with the territory."

— *Former family caregiver, AZ*

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For more information visit www.thefamilycaregiver.org or call 800/896-3650