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Tip Sheet: Family Caregiving

What's the Problem?

When an older adult is unable to care for themselves alone, often a member of their family takes on the role as their caregiver. Approximately 43.5 million caregivers have provided unpaid care to an adult or child in the last 12 months.

More than half of adults who reach age 65 will – at some point – need a high level of support with basic daily activities, such as walking, eating, bathing, and getting out of bed. People needing help with basic daily activities may also have a range of additional support that is needed, such as help with paying bills, taking medications regularly, and scheduling and getting to appointments and social activities. In some families, one parent may be caring for the other who has dementia; while they have functional support needs themselves.

Caregiving can be an extremely rewarding task, but often the emotional and physical pressure can create negative health consequences. These may include elevated levels of stress, depression, and difficulty maintaining a healthy lifestyle. Economic hardships and a lack of sleep also come along with caring for a loved one. Supporting someone else's well-being is a large responsibility, and the caregiver often is left with minimal time to care for themselves.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been an extremely difficult time for caregivers as they continue to provide support for those at the highest risk for severe illness. This has added to the compounding stress on family caregivers, as they are in constant fear of getting their older family member sick, while balancing their own personal risk of infection.

Who Is at Risk?

A child, sibling, parent, or spouse of a loved one is most impacted by family caregiving. Anyone can become a family caregiver if someone in their life, who they deeply care about, needs a caregiver.

How Can Family Caregivers Help?

While family caregiving is not mandated by law, two-thirds of all older adults with high levels of need who live at home get all their support from unpaid family caregivers.

Family caregivers make up the backbone of support for older Americans. There are generally three categories of support. The first is physical or hands-on care, such as direct help with daily activities. Second, families provide a substantial amount of financial support, from helping a loved one manage their money to directly paying for care. Third, families provide a great deal of emotional support to their loved one, especially as health issues become more complicated.

Bottom Line

Family caregiving can be extremely stressful but comes with the reward of knowing that your loved one is under your own loving care. It can bring much fulfillment, love, meaningful time spent together, elevated self-worth and happiness by acting as a family caregiver but finding the balance can be incredibly difficult.

Currently, there are seven potential family caregivers per adult in need. By 2030, there will be only four potential family caregivers per adult.

Case Example

Just last week, 86-year-old Pearl – who is living with Alzheimer’s disease – was at the grocery store and found herself in the ice cream aisle questioning her whereabouts. With her disease progressing so rapidly, Pearl was unable to perform her daily living needs independently and live alone. This was extremely hard for Lisa to witness; she did not want to place her mother in a nursing home. Needing to know Pearl is safe, Lisa decided to take on care responsibility for her mom.

Pearl’s disease has changed her personality, leaving her acting somewhat child-like. She finds solace dressing up in ball gowns and playing house with Lisa’s youngest daughter, Lexi who is 10 years old. Though emotional and extremely hard for Lisa, caring for her mother is the right choice. She is coping with the new relationship and role she plays in her mother’s life.

Resources

- Caregiving, CDC: <http://www.cdc.gov/aging/caregiving/index.htm>
- Caregiver Statistics: Demographics: <https://www.caregiver.org/caregiver-statistics-demographics>
- Caregiving, AARP: <http://www.aarp.org/home-family/caregiving/?cmp=RDRCT-CRNGG APR12 012>
- CDC, Older Adults & COVID-19: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/older-adults.html>