



FAMILY

Care for the Elderly

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Quick Facts...

The family continues to provide a great deal of care and support to the frail and dependent elderly.

In spite of the burdens involved in caregiving, many individuals report that caring for a frail and dependent elderly loved one provides a great deal of satisfaction.

The limitations of one's personal life represents one major source of stress for care givers.

Role conflict is greatest among middle-aged daughters and daughters-in-law, who frequently are parents, spouses, housekeepers, and workers in addition to being care givers.

Impacts of Caregiving: Burden

Most care givers devote a great deal of time, money and energy to caregiving. The public often assumes that these responsibilities place overwhelming burdens on care givers. While it is true that the burdens of caregiving are evident and widely publicized, it is important to remember that there is a great deal of variation among care givers in terms of the impact of caregiving on the care givers and their families. Many researchers note that the level of burden or stress among family members caring for elderly loved ones is much less than expected given the severity of the care recipient's disability and the many demands placed on the care giver.

Family care givers seem to have a reservoir of coping mechanisms that mitigate against the potentially negative consequences of unrelenting caregiving responsibilities. Furthermore, the caregiving experience has many positive aspects that can counteract the negative impacts.

Benefits of Caregiving

Although most research emphasizes the negative aspects of caregiving, a few studies identify the benefits of caring for an aged loved one. The central theme of these studies is that "in the main, having an elderly parent is gratifying and helpful. Older people are a resource for their children, providing many forms of assistance. Most people help their parents willingly when need be and derive satisfaction from doing so" (Brody, 1985, pg. 21).

For some adult child care givers, caring for a parent can substitute for a failed marriage, widowhood, or an unfulfilled work career. For elderly married care givers, the intense investment in the care giver role may help compensate for the loss of other roles as one ages. Therefore, caregiving often provides the care giver with a renewed sense of usefulness.

Data from the National Survey of Informal Care givers shows that almost three-quarters of the respondents reported that caregiving makes them feel useful. Married care givers, in particular, view caregiving as a major contribution to their self-worth. Approximately two out of three care givers also note that the disabled older loved one keeps them company.

In addition to these benefits, caregiving may also result in an improved relationship between the care giver and the care recipient, and a better understanding of the impaired loved one. Finally, the care giver experience often helps to put other stresses into perspective, and thus may enhance one's sense of well-being despite the stresses imposed by caregiving tasks.

Negative Aspects of Caregiving

The majority of studies on caregiving document the negative impacts or consequences of caring for a frail and dependent parent or spouse. The term used

Eight Tips to Aid Care givers

1. *Set realistic goals. Do the best possible to assure quality of life, comfort and safety for the relative, but don't try to work miracles.*
2. *Ask for help. Suggest ways for other family members to contribute or ask a friend or neighbor to help for an hour or two a week. If possible, hire respite care workers.*
3. *Take personal time. It is important to take time out from caregiving to do things for yourself. Do not catch up on postponed tasks.*
4. *Pay attention to your personal health. Exercise, get adequate rest, eat well-balanced, nutritious meals.*
5. *Learn home-care skills. Ask home-care specialists, nurses and other professionals for ways to manage body mechanics (skin care, incontinence, etc.). Knowing what to expect and how to respond to the relative's need will boost self confidence.*
6. *Plan with, not for, the family member that needs care. Respect the aging person's need for autonomy and involve them in decision making. If they won't accept help for needed services, ask a doctor or social worker.*
7. *Discourage dependency. A Case Western Reserve University study shows that being dependent on someone for care leads to depression. Families can help by encouraging a dependent person to make contributions, even small ones, to the household.*
8. *Recognize the positive aspects of caregiving.*

to describe these negative impacts or consequences is “care giver burden” or “care giver stress.”

Sources of Care giver Stress

Personal limitations. The limitations on one's personal life is a major source of stress for care givers. Restriction of one's social life is frequently cited as a major source of stress. Infringement on privacy appears to be a problem for close to 25 percent. Approximately one in three care givers report that the constant attention required by the older loved one limits the time one has for personal activities.

Competing demands. Most care givers assume a number of roles in addition to their caregiving responsibilities. Much of the research on caregiving focuses on the competing demands placed on care givers who attempt to juggle multiple roles.

The potential for role conflict is particularly great among middle-aged daughters and daughters-in-law, who frequently are parents, spouses, housekeepers, and workers in addition to being care givers. This group of care givers is labeled as “women-in-the-middle” or “the sandwich generation” because of their precarious position between two generations of dependent individuals (children and aging parents). National estimates show there are at least 200,000 women who provide elder care and child care simultaneously. Moreover, 40 percent of women-in-the-middle are employed. As more and more women choose to delay their childbearing and enter the labor force, the size of the sandwich generation will likely increase.

Research suggests that competing familial obligations does not reduce the amount of time daughters spend caring for an aging parent. Rather, these care givers double up on their responsibilities and cut back on their personal leisure time to fulfill all of their caregiving tasks.

Employment also represents a conflicting demand for care givers. A relatively small proportion of care givers actually quit their jobs to assume a full-time caregiving role.

Emotional and physical demands. The emotional and physical demands of caregiving represent the most significant negative impact. Frequently the loved one receiving care is demanding and displays disruptive or aggressive behavior. This is particularly true in cases where the loved one suffers from a dementia such as Alzheimer's Disease. More than three-fifths of care givers are bothered by the confusion and forgetfulness of the aged care recipient. A little less than one-half (mostly wives and daughters) report that sleep interruptions by the erratic behavior of the loved one receiving care. One-fifth of informal family care givers report that the care recipient's behavior is embarrassing, and emotionally draining.

Many care givers also report problems with the physical demands placed on them by the care recipient. For example, a little over one-third of the care givers have difficulty lifting or moving their elderly loved ones. In addition, close to two-fifths of these care givers (women in particular) have to help the care recipient when they are ill.

Care giver Strain

The combination of personal limitations, competing role demands, and the stress from the emotional and physical demands of caregiving take their toll on the well-being of the care giver. This is referred to as “care giver strain.”

Emotional strain. Findings from numerous caregiving studies indicate that significant emotional strain results from the burdens from caregiving. Care givers frequently report depression, anxiety, feelings and helplessness, lowered morale, and emotional exhaustion.

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Data from the 1982 Long-Term Care Survey of Informal Care givers indicated that females are more likely than males to report emotional strain from caregiving, even when levels of caregiving involvement are the same.

Physical strain. The care giver is frequently referred to as “the hidden patient.” This suggests that caregiving may have negative consequences for the physical health of the care giver. Temper this with data from national surveys of care givers that indicates that only 16 percent cite caregiving as a contributor to a decline in physical health. We still do not know enough to clearly state the relationship between the burdens of caregiving and measures of the care giver’s health. What we do know is that wives are more likely than other relatives or friends to report physical strain with more than 25 percent of them that report that their health declined with caregiving responsibilities.

Financial strain. Although several studies report that a low proportion of care givers cite financial hardship from caregiving, interpret this with caution. We know that families frequently underreport the degree of economic strain experienced because they feel they should absorb the costs of care for a dependent loved one who, in the past, has provided so much financial and emotional support to the care giver. In addition, the great majority of care givers who are living with the care recipient find it difficult, if not impossible, to separate the costs of caregiving from the overall family expenses. Moreover, the research on the financial impact of caregiving only examines financial burden at one point in time. It is likely that economic strain increases over the months and years of providing long-term care.

Family strain. In addition to the emotional, physical and financial strain on the care giver, caring for a frail and dependent loved one may have a significant impact on family relations. National data from the Long-Term Care-Informal Care giver Survey indicates that approximately 25 percent of caregiving children and 33 percent of other single care givers have dependent children (under age 18) living at home. The competing demands of child care and elder care may produce care giver overload or burnout. Spending time away from one’s family is a major concern for a large proportion of informal care givers.

There also is evidence that elder care creates family conflict and disruption, although the magnitude of this disruption is still unstudied. Differences in values and opinions among adult siblings can create a considerable degree of interpersonal conflict, as do differences between the desires of adult children and a caregiving spouse.

Finally, several studies report an increased strain between the care giver and the care recipient.

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