

Healthymagination Blog

Managing Stress: Caregivers Need Care Too

BY LISA JAFFE HUBBELL • POSTED NOVEMBER 19 2010 AT 1:17 PM

There are plenty of stories about the sandwich generation – those who take care of both children and parents – but who really expects to spend their middle years caring day and night for sick elderly relatives? It's reality to 65 million people in America of every race, class and income bracket. Just ask *Dancing With The Stars* contestant and former *Entertainment Tonight* host Leeza Gibbons whose experience caring for her mom led her to create the [Leeza's Place](#) foundation devoted to helping caregivers – many of whom are unaware of the emotional and physical toll stress can take on them.



Elizabeth Shean (who uses a pseudonym to protect her family's privacy) chronicled her seven-month journey taking care of her elderly father on a [blog](#) at Caring.com, through his death in July. "I underestimated how stressful it was," she says. Sometimes, you recognize stress, but at other times, it takes someone else pointing it out and suggesting a break. "Even when my husband told me a couple times I needed to get away, you can't just find the time. You need a large support network to make it happen."

Some people know in advance they'll be caregivers – Shean will take her mom into her home when the time comes. For such families, making a plan and putting together

a support network is vital, says Meredith Resnick, LCSW, who [blogs](#) about caregiving on *Psychology Today's* website.

Support systems can work two ways – people who call you and ask what you need, or people you call when you need something. Either way, Meredith Resnick, LCSW, who [blogs](#) about caregiving on *Psychology Today's* website, you have to be specific. Caregivers shouldn't ask for "help," but instead they should ask a friend to mow the lawn or sit with the sick person for a couple of hours so they can get a much needed break.

It can be hard to give up control, Resnick says. Caregivers may fear what might happen if they aren't there, or believe that only they can or should be doing this for their loved one. "Sometimes, you just have to let go," she says.

Shean says giving up guilt – at wishing the situation was over, resenting the intrusion in your life – and learning not to take outbursts, either physical or verbal, are vital to maintaining mental health. "When my dad tried to twist my finger off, he wasn't trying to hurt me. It wasn't him. And he didn't know it was me."

How do you know you're near the breaking point? If you are snappish, if you yell at doctors and nurses without reason, if you ruminate on problems and reject all solutions – those are signs of a problem. Oversensitivity, rigidity, and withdrawal from your previous life are other concerning signals, says Resnick. Research also shows that 40% to 70% of caregivers demonstrate symptoms of depression.

Fortunately, there are several tools that help lighten the load, including these iPhone apps.

*[iPills](#): Keeping track of pills is no easy feat. The iPhone's i Pill app monitors medication your family member takes regularly—at any interval—and also allows you to record when extra doses are given.

*[Polka's MyEmergency](#): This electronic medical record makes your loved one's health profile immediately accessible- ideal in cases of emergency. An added feature is the ability to map the nearest hospital.

*[Human Atlas](#) by Blausen Medical: This app's 3D medical illustrations and glossaries help you understand common medical conditions and treatments with over 7,000 animations. Knowledge helps keep fears at bay.

*[Elder 411](#): Caregivers can access this app's useful tips including elder safety precautions, answers to hundreds of common questions from caregivers, audio introductions that explain crisis stages, and resources for hiring help.

*[Relax](#): The stress of caregiving is not unique- these relaxation apps are meant for you. Take the time to choose a soothing sound from nature (such as ocean waves), so that you can recharge and ease anxiety. The best caregiver is a healthy caregiver so permit yourself time to take care of you. Try [Ambiance](#) or [Relax Melodies](#).

Most caregivers rarely get a weekend or even a night away. But a 10-minute break every hour or so can be revitalizing, too, says Resnick. Have a cup of tea; do some yoga stretches; scream into a pillow. "You have to feel free to let go for a while."

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There are several great websites with advice for caregivers: TheCargiversclub.com has some great [resources](#), including [books](#) by Vicki Rackner, MD, including her latest, *Caregiving Without Regret*. The National Cancer Institute site offers ideas on [coping](#) for friends and family. Helpguide has symptoms of [burnout](#). For tips on avoiding burnout, see the caring.com. Strengthforcaring.com is a very comprehensive site. For symptoms and resources on [caregiver stress](#), visit the Alzheimer's Association site.

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