

## Staying Healthy While Caregiving

November is National Family Caregiver Month, which makes this is the perfect time to focus on caregivers. More than 50 million people provide care for a loved one each year. The level of care provided can range from running a few errands for an elderly family member to around the clock care. Approximately 21 million caregivers are also raising their own kids. Two-thirds are also employed full or part-time. The Family Caregiver Alliance reports that between 46 to 59 percent of caregivers are clinically depressed. Caregivers face an enormous challenge.

Trying to manage someone else's care while ignoring your own needs, can lead to a breakdown in your physical and mental well being. To be an effective caregiver you must be willing to ask for help and set priorities. In fact, you have to make yourself a priority.

First, acknowledge that it is acceptable to have a life outside of caregiving. Focusing only on your caregiver duties can lead to major stress. Plan some time away to do the things you enjoy. Don't focus all your energy on your loved one. Caregivers need to have fun, too. Managing stress before it overwhelms you is the key to good mental health.

Being a caregiver can be a rewarding experience, but a caregiver needs a break from time to time. One way to make sure this happens is to get help from others. If someone offers to help, give them a specific task. Ask them to bring a meal, stay with your loved one while you go out or run an errand for you. If no one offers, ask for help. People who are not caregivers may not understand how stressful and demanding it is to be a caregiver. Many times people are glad to help, but they just don't know what is needed.

Staying connected to friends is another important stress reliever. It's easy to get so busy with caregiving that you lose touch with friends. Pick up the phone and reconnect, or plan a lunch with friends. If you can't get out, have a friend pick up take out food and come to you with lunch. Sharing a few laughs with friends can be rejuvenating. It's a fact that laughter boosts the immune system.

Diet and exercise also play an important part in stress reduction. Regular physical activity is a must. If you can't make it to the gym, walk around the block a couple of times a day or buy a home exercise video to do at home. Studies show that several short exercise sessions such as 10 minutes of walking or stair climbing each day gives you the same positive benefits as exercising for one longer session. Exercise is a wonderful way to feel good about yourself and it can help alleviate mild depression.

Eating healthy will give you the energy you need to get through your busy day. Our bodies wear down quickly if they are not properly fueled. Fruits, vegetables, whole grains and protein are the best choices to stay energized. Avoid large amounts of fat, sugar and salt.

Finally, remember that you do not have to do everything perfectly. It's important to keep your expectations of yourself, and others, realistic. Concentrate on important commitments, and let go of less important commitments. Be good to yourself, and caregiving will be much less stressful, and much more rewarding.