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Programs and
Services

Helpline

Support Groups

Early Stage Memory
Loss Program

Care Consultation &
Family Counseling

Speakers Bureau

Educational
Workshops and
Training Programs

Research

Advocacy

Taking Care of Yourself as a Caregiver

Learn How to Recognize and Reduce Caregiver Stress

by Kim DeHart, Program Director

Family caregivers devote a significant amount of energy, care, and time to providing care for their loved one and this experience can often prove to be overwhelming. Many caregivers feel sad, discouraged, isolated, or even angry.

With an average of 69-100 hours per week devoted to caring for a person with memory loss, it's not surprising that many caregivers experience a decline in their own health and often feel depressed and burned out. Providing care for a loved one is most often described as a labor of love rather than a family burden. However, caregivers need to take care of themselves in order to provide the best care for their loved one.

Too often, caregivers don't recognize their own needs or simply don't know where to turn for help. Too much stress can be damaging to both the caregiver and their loved one with Alzheimer's disease.

What Makes Caregiving for a Person with Dementia Difficult?

Being a caregiver to a person with dementia can be particularly challenging and difficult. The responsibilities a caregiver assumes are continually changing as the disease progresses and the person with dementia may not be

able to show her appreciation for the care she receives.

The stress of caregiving is double (for those caring for someone with Alzheimer's disease) – it takes an awful lot of work to care for your loved one and the person does not appreciate you or what you are doing. In fact, they often act resentful."

Dr. Burton Reifler

"The Perils of Stress in Caregiving"

People we typically turn to for support such as family and friends may not be able to provide the emotional support caregivers need and may not understand the situation they're in.

"No one thought my mother's behavior was a problem. My neighbors were not understanding; they thought she was just old and acting the way old people act."

from *"The Perils of Stress in Caregiving"*

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Recognizing and Reducing Caregiver Stress

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The Alzheimer's Association can help caregivers cope with the challenges that may come with the opportunity to care for a loved one. Consider these tips for reducing stress and taking care of yourself as a caregiver:

• Get a diagnosis as early as possible.

Once you know what you're dealing with, you'll be able to better manage the present and plan for the future.

• Know what resources are available. For your own well-being and that of the person you're caring for, become familiar with Alzheimer care resources available in your community. The Michigan Great Lakes Chapter is a good place to start!

• Become an educated caregiver. Get involved in the chapter's support groups and educational programs and take advantage of free brochures and lending library resources.

• Take care of yourself. Pay attention to yourself and watch your diet; exercise; and get plenty of rest. Use respite services to make time away for yourself.

• Manage your level of stress. Stress can cause physical problems (blurred vision, stomach irritation, high blood pressure) and changes in behavior (irritability, lack of concentration, loss of appetite). Pay attention to your symptoms; use relaxation techniques that work for you and consult a physician.

• Accept changes as they occur. People with Alzheimer's change and so do their

needs. They often require care beyond what you can provide at home. Investigate available care options to make transitions easier and accept support from those who care about you and your loved one.

• Do legal and financial planning. Consult an attorney and discuss issues related to durable power of attorney, living wills and trusts, and future medical care and housing. Planning now will alleviate stress later.

• Be realistic. Until a cure is found, the progression of Alzheimer's is inevitable. The care you provide does make a difference. Remember neither you nor your loved one can control many of the circumstances and behaviors that will occur.

• Give yourself credit, not guilt. You're only human. Occasionally, you may lose patience and at times, be unable to provide all of the care the way you would like. Remember, you're doing the best you can, so give yourself credit. Your loved one needs you and you are there. That's something to be proud of.

The Michigan Great Lakes Chapter is currently offering programs on caregiver stress throughout our 21-county service area. This program is designed to help caregivers cope with their caregiving commitment and prepare for what is to come.

Program highlights include information on stress indicators, tips for reducing stress, as well as guidance on how to seek support and where to turn for help. To find out when this program is being offered in your area, refer to the education program and support group insert enclosed in this newsletter.

From "Caregiver Stress: Signs to Watch for, Steps to Take," 1995. The Alzheimer's Disease and Related Disorders Association, Inc.

Resources

Brochures
"Caregiver Stress: Signs to Watch for, Steps to Take"
 Alzheimer's Disease and Related Disorders Association, Inc., 1995

"Especially for the Caregiver,"
 Alzheimer's Disease and Related Disorders Association, Inc., 1999

Booklet
"Take Care: A Guide for Caregivers on How to Improve Their Self-Care,"
 Alzheimer's Disease and Related Disorders Association, Inc., 1998

To obtain these and other resources, contact the chapter office at (734) 677-3081 or (800) 337-3827.