

# Caring for Aging Parents and/or parents with Alzheimer's/Dementia

Adult children of parents, who are aging, have Alzheimer's or some other form of Dementia often find themselves with so many responsibilities that they neglect their own well-being. Taking on additional tasks also engenders considerable stress. You may be so overwhelmed with caring for your loved one that you neglect your own well-being. If you find yourself without the time to take care of your own needs, you may be putting yourself and your health at risk.

For example, a 2007 study by Evercare<sup>®</sup> reported that the stress from providing care to aging and/or sick parents takes a big toll on the caregiver's health. In fact, two-thirds of the caregivers surveyed said that they had increased anxiety or stress as resulting from their caregiving responsibilities. If you experience signs of stress on a regular basis, consult your doctor. Ignoring them can cause your physical and mental health to decline. Additional study findings indicate that:

- Nearly half (49 percent) of caregivers polled reported difficulty sleeping.
- Nearly half (48 percent) used vacation or sick days at work in order to provide care.
- One-fourth (26 percent) reported that they had experienced new or worsening health problems as a result of caregiving.
- More than one-third (37 percent) cut back on work hours or quit work entirely.
- Almost one-third of Alzheimer caregivers get less exercise than they did before taking on caregiving duties. It's important to keep your mind and body in shape.

Symptoms of caregiver stress may include:

- Denial
- Anger
- Social withdrawal
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Exhaustion
- Sleeplessness
- Irritability
- Lack of concentration
- Problems with physical health

Tips for Dealing with Stress--Here are some tips on keeping your stress levels as low as possible:

- Know what resources are available. Adult day care, in-home assistance, visiting nurses and Meals-on-Wheels are just some of the services that can help you. Find out what's available in your community.

- Become an educated caregiver. As your loved one continues to age or the disease progresses, new caregiving skills will become necessary. The Alzheimer's Association and [www.alz.org](http://www.alz.org) can provide you with information and resources on all aspects of the disease.
- Get help. You are not failing as a caregiver by asking others for assistance. Seek the support of family, friends, paid providers, and community resources.
- Take care of yourself. Watch your diet, exercise and get plenty of rest. Make time for friends and family. Take advantage of respite care -options so you can take a break once in a while.
- Manage your stress level. If you experience any of the symptoms of caregiver stress, try relaxation techniques that work for you and consult your doctor to learn if there's anything further you can do.
- Accept changes as they occur. People with Alzheimer's will change, and so will their daily needs. They often require care beyond what you can provide – and it's important that you don't try to do everything yourself.
- Make legal and financial plans. At the beginning of your duties as a caregiver, consult an attorney to discuss legal, financial and care issues. Whenever possible, involve the person with Alzheimer's and family members.
- Be realistic. Many of the behaviors that occur are beyond your control and the control of the person with Alzheimer's. You will need to find time alone or with supportive friends to grieve and be angry.
- Give yourself credit without guilt. You are doing the best you can. Don't feel guilty because you can't do more. The person with Alzheimer's needs you, and you are there.
- Experience the moment. Focus on the good things that come from providing care for aging parents and those with Alzheimer's disease.
- Obtain respite care. It's normal to sometimes feel like you need a break from your caregiving duties. Respite care can provide such a break as it enables another individual or paid service provider to temporarily assume your caregiving duties. It's a good way to take some time for yourself while your loved one gets an opportunity to interact with someone else. Respite care can provide you with: (1) a chance to spend time with other friends and family, or to just relax; (2) time to take care of errands such as shopping, exercising, getting a haircut or going to the doctor; and (3) comfort and peace of mind knowing that your loved one is spending time with another caring individual.
- Plan for changing roles and relationships. Changes in relationships with the aging parent whether he or she has Alzheimer's or not will occur and is quite normal, yet can be difficult to understand. You may find yourself taking on a new role in your relationship as your loved one's health and memory declines. He or she may no longer be able to perform certain tasks, such as balancing a checkbook, doing taxes, handling financial and legal matters or doing certain household chores. Making important decisions on your own may feel overwhelming. Prepare for these changes by reaching out to family, friends, professionals or community resources for assistance.
- Get moving. Getting enough exercise is important for you and your loved one. You can get a quick workout and involve the person with dementia at the same time. There are plenty of ways you can both be active: (1) take a walk together outside to enjoy the fresh air; (2) go to your favorite mall and take a stroll indoors; (3) do seated exercises at home; (4) dance together to favorite music; and (5) garden or do other routine activities that you both enjoy

In order to successfully carry out these responsibilities, it's essential to maintain one's own good physical, mental, spiritual, emotional, and psychological health. It's important to have a strong support network as you provide care for your loved one. So, review these suggestions to determine which ones may work best for you. And, take the initiative to contact family and friends and explain that while caring for aging parents or a parent with Alzheimer's disease has changed your lives in some ways, you value their friendship and support.