



## 12: Taking Care of Yourself

### Introduction

An estimated 8.4 million Americans provide care to someone with mental illness.<sup>50</sup> Being an effective caregiver is difficult, and to meet the challenge, you need to take care of yourself. Sounds simple. Those who provide care know otherwise. There are many barriers to caring for yourself such as setting aside time, finding resources, and the tendency to put yourself last.

Taking care of yourself is the most important thing that you can do, not only for yourself, but also for the person you care for and the rest of the family. Family caregivers carry the weight of not only providing personal and instrumental care (e.g., running errands, medications), but they often have to manage other responsibilities. What do you do when you get tired? Keep going? What do you do when you need help? Keep going? What happens when you cannot go anymore? Taking care of yourself includes recognizing when you need help to balance your own physical, emotional, financial, social, and spiritual needs.

### Background: Mental Health Caregivers

Mental health caregivers experience many challenges. You are not alone. Millions of other caregivers express high levels of stress, financial issues, isolation, and concerns for the future. Studies of the caregivers of adults with mental illness found that:

- Mental health caregivers experience higher levels of stress than other family caregivers.
- The typical mental health caregiver provides an average of 32 hours of care per week for an average of nine years. Mental health caregivers address their care recipient's needs for more hours a week and more years on average, than caregivers for other conditions.
- Care recipients are likely to be financially dependent upon family and friends (49%-64%).
- Few parents who are mental health caregivers have plans in place for someone to care for their son or daughter when they can no longer do so (32%).
- Parents who care for people with mental illness say their caregiving role has made

<sup>50</sup> This is a minimal prevalence projection based on national estimates of caregiving prevalence from *Caregiving in the U.S. 2015* (see *On Pins & Needles: Caregivers of Adults with Mental Illness, 2015*).



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their own health worse (62%). As they continue to age and provide care, they may be forced to rely on others, yet 65% of parent caregivers reported that there were no other family members or friends for their adult child to turn to for assistance.<sup>51</sup>

### Challenges Facing Mental Health Caregivers

- Loneliness, isolation, lack of social support
- Health issues related to the stress of caregiving
- Navigating the care system
- Accurate and timely diagnosis for the care recipient
- Medication management
- Planning for the future
- Mental health caregiver training and education

### What You Can Do to Take Care of Yourself

There are several ways you can care for yourself as you continue your caregiving journey. The National Alliance for Caregiving (NAC) provides a Caregiver Health Self-Assessment Questionnaire on their website (see below). The tool helps you look at your own situation, consider options, and make decisions that will allow you to take care of yourself within the context of your caregiving responsibilities.

#### **Caregiver Health Self-Assessment Questionnaire: English**

[www.caregiving.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/caregiverselfassessment\\_english.pdf](http://www.caregiving.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/caregiverselfassessment_english.pdf)

#### **Caregiver Health Self-Assessment Questionnaire: Spanish**

[www.caregiving.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/caregiverselfassessment\\_spanish.pdf](http://www.caregiving.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/caregiverselfassessment_spanish.pdf)

#### **Physical Health**

Taking care of yourself includes physical activity, sleep, and diet, at a minimum. Physical activity has many benefits that are well documented, although for caregivers, it is difficult to find the time to fit it in. A short walk can bring benefits and can be accomplished with a mindful approach and some planning. The following are some tips to include regular physical activity:

- Set a timer for taking a walk.
- Plan your route ahead of time.
- Bring walking shoes with you or keep them in your car.
- For smartphone users, consider downloading an app such as “Map My Walk” (free) to help provide motivation related to calories burned, distance, etc.
- Set a goal for your walk such as 20 minutes to start, which can be 10 minutes one way, 10 minutes back.
- If leaving the home is a barrier to physical activity look around your home for opportunities to exercise. For example, climbing stairs if that is accessible to you, running in place, or floor stretches. There are several online programs that provide guidance for in-home exercises.
- Although it can be a challenge at times, eating well is important. Eating a balanced diet is important for your overall health, and for your ability to care for the person you love.

<sup>51</sup> National Alliance for Caregiving (2015). *On Pins & Needles: Caregivers of Adults with Mental Illness*.



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- Stay hydrated by drinking plenty of water and minimize alcohol intake during stressful times.
- Sleep is important. Get as much uninterrupted sleep as you can. When you cannot sleep through the night, find times to nap, even for short periods of time.

### **Spiritual Health**

Attending to your spiritual side can take many forms, including prayer, meditation, yoga, spending time in nature, personal writing, or attending worship services. The main benefit of spiritual practice for caregivers is the time you dedicate to yourself. One thing we know about caregiving is that it leaves very little time for you. There are many ways to infuse spiritual activities into daily life:

- Take a walk in a place that is quiet or peaceful.
- Access to the internet allows those who can't get away to take a few moments for an online yoga class, meditation lesson, or writing group.
- Your local library can provide an escape, if even for a moment. There are many books with topics related to spirituality.
- Local groups found on meetup.com or through your community center or senior care center can often provide resources.

### **Emotional Health**

Caregiving can be an emotional journey. It is critical to recognize when you need emotional support from friends, family, or others who are on a similar journey. Knowing that you are not alone and that others are there for you can provide much-needed comfort. Taking care of yourself emotionally will allow you to find the strength to continue

your journey as a caregiver. There are many ways to improve your emotional health:

- Caregiver support groups are a wonderful way to connect with others who are on a similar journey. There are many types of groups such as condition-specific, gender-specific, online, or in-person groups.
- Social support is critical to emotional health. Set aside time on a regular basis to meet a friend for coffee, or have a friend come visit you, if even for a short time.
- Do something for yourself. Take yourself to a movie or dinner. Although time is often the main issue, it is important to find some time for your needs so that you can continue to care for the care recipient. Your local Area Agency on Aging may be able to provide resources for respite care.

### **Financial Health**

Taking care of yourself means taking care of your finances. Caring for a care recipient can often mean out-of-pocket expenses that quickly add up. Meeting with a financial advisor can help you feel more in control of your finances and even help you make informed decisions about your care situation. Financial advisors can be found at your local bank, or local aging network groups such as senior centers or your Area Agency on Aging.



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### **Helpful Websites**

#### **AARP-Caregiving**

[www.aarp.org/home-family/caregiving](http://www.aarp.org/home-family/caregiving)

#### **Caregiver Action Network**

[caregiveraction.org](http://caregiveraction.org)

#### **Family Caregiver Alliance**

[www.caregiver.org](http://www.caregiver.org)

#### **National Alliance for Caregiving**

[www.caregiving.org](http://www.caregiving.org)

#### **National Alliance for Mental Illness**

[www.nami.org/Find-Support/Family-Members-and-Caregivers](http://www.nami.org/Find-Support/Family-Members-and-Caregivers)