

The

# BURDENS & blessings

## of Family Caregiving

When a loved one is sick or injured, many of us find that nothing comes more naturally than administering tender loving care. Caring for dependent members is one of the primary functions of the family. Parents care for their children until they are old enough to take care of themselves. Married couples vow to stay together in sickness as well as in health. In both traditional and modern societies, most families “take care of their own” in times of need, even when family ties have been strained or weakened by years of conflict, neglect, or distance.

But what happens when a family member needs help every day for several years, or when his or her condition is deteriorating, or when helping starts to interfere with other responsibilities and relationships? What happens if the person needing care is a parent and the roles of a lifetime are reversed, forcing us to act like a parent to our own mother or father? What happens if our loved one doesn't even remember our name?

Thousands of Americans face these complex issues every day. As people live longer, more and more people are finding themselves becoming caregivers for dependent older adults. Although most adults over age 65 are self-sufficient, a significant minority (almost 1 in 4) are limited in their ability to do activities of daily living like grocery shopping or making telephone calls or personal care, such as bathing or toilet routines. And although we hear a lot these days about the decline of the family and family values, most “eldercare” is done at home by family members and other unpaid helpers, such as friends

and neighbors. The majority of family members caring for dependent older adults are spouses (primarily wives) and adult children (primarily daughters), reflecting our traditional division of labor between men and women.

### **The Challenges of Caregiving**

Many people who undertake caregiving for a frail, vulnerable, ill, or disabled older adult report that the job is stressful and full of challenges. For some, the caregiving duties are

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relatively easy and include grocery shopping, writing checks, doing laundry, or arranging for paid helpers to do chores and home repairs. In other cases, though, the older relative is totally dependent on caregivers around-the-clock. Family caregivers who attend to people who are bedbound must learn to bathe, dress, lift, and move their relatives. Caregivers of people with dementing illnesses must also exercise constant watch to keep their loved ones from harming themselves. Sometimes being a caregiver means being companion, entertainer, nurse, doctor, advocate, pharmacist, chauffeur, parent, and maid, among other roles. These multiple roles may simply be too much for one person to manage.

For spouses and other relatives who are older adults themselves, the physical and emotional demands of caregiving can take their toll in terms of

aged adults are sometimes described as members of the “sandwich generation” squeezed between the needs of their parents and their own children, with no time to attend to their own needs.

In the last two decades, researchers have been studying caregivers to determine why some people experience psychological and physical problems as a result of being a caregiver and why others seem to avoid those problems. Studies have shown that women caregivers are more likely to report symptoms of emotional distress than are men caregivers. Researchers speculate that this may be because women are more likely to put other relationships and activities on hold during this time. Also, people in poor health and people caring for confused patients with disruptive behaviors are more likely to report symptoms of emotional distress than are healthier people and caregivers of family members with other illnesses such as cancer or cardiovascular disease. Caregivers who think their finances are inadequate, those with their own psychological problems, those with fewer people to talk to or help out, and those taking care of dementia patients tend to have poorer physical health than other caregivers.

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high levels of stress, frustration, depression, guilt, and health problems. For some people, the emotional stresses of caregiving continue even after the person receiving care goes to a nursing home. For adult children, especially those with jobs and families of their own, caregiving responsibilities may mean “role overload.” Sometimes adult children who live hours away from their parents become “long-distance caregivers,” contracting with paid caregivers and managing a care situation by telephone. Understandably, middle-

### ***The Positive Side of Caregiving***

Although most of the research has focused on the burdens of being a caregiver, some people report that helping family members is very satisfying. Many of today’s generation of older women embrace the caregiving role as an extension of the family roles they have filled over a lifetime. If their husbands become ill or disabled, many women take on the role of caregiver

automatically, unquestioningly, and comfortably, even if it means a disruption in plans and routines and considerable self-sacrifice. Many caregivers, both men and women, report finding meaning in the role because it fits with their personal, spiritual, or religious values and philosophy of life. Some caregivers report they enjoy the time they spend with their spouse, the chance to grow closer to the care receiver, the intimacy of personal care, and the sense of being needed and appreciated. Others feel that caregiving provides opportunities for being creative about problem-solving.

Similarly adult children who take on the roles of helper or caregiver to an elderly parent report that they appreciate the opportunity to get closer to their parents and the chance to give something back to them in return for their parents' earlier sacrifices on their behalf. Some adult children find that participating in caregiving reduces their worry about the quality of care the parents would receive if left entirely to formal, paid caregivers.

## ***Coping with Caregiving***

Even at its best, caregiving can test a person's ingenuity and patience. Although people vary greatly in styles of caregiving and in their feelings about the role, some caregivers have found ways to make the burdens lighter. Professionals who work with caregivers suggest a few strategies for coping with caregiver stress:

- Take care of yourself. Many caregivers find themselves so busy caring for others that they neglect their own routine health care, or delay seeing a doctor until new problems are in an advanced state.

- Share the load. Find others to help out and to talk to. Often other family members, friends, and neighbors would welcome the chance to help, but may not know how. Let them know specific things you would find helpful, whether it is taking your car for state inspection or relieving you so that you can take a 30-minute walk.

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- Tap community resources. Learn about resources available to help family caregivers, including support groups, in-home services, respite care (substitute caregivers), adult day care, and individual and family counseling, often with fees adjusted for a client's ability to pay. Contact your county's organization that deals with programs and services for older adults or your county Cooperative Extension Service for additional information about support services and educational programs.
- Look on the bright side to improve your quality of life. Find the humor in daily life and allow yourself to laugh. When you do get a break, do something you really like, without guilt. As with all life's stressful challenges, a positive attitude can go a long way in reducing the feeling of burden and bringing to light the hidden rewards of a difficult situation.

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