

Caring for the Caregiver

The cancer experience involves more than just the patient. Often a trusted family member or friend helps along the way. When a loved one becomes ill, life may become both physically and emotionally challenging. The world goes on much the same as before yet you are faced with a whole new set of responsibilities. It is common to feel afraid, angry, helpless, guilty, overwhelmed, frustrated, and sad. This is normal when coping with a major life change. Many times, caregivers wait too long before they admit their exhaustion, which makes it more difficult to find ways to help. These caregivers are important in the patient's care. Without them, the cancer experience may be a lonely one. It is important to watch for early signs of stress in order to take steps to stop it from getting worse.

You may be a caregiver if:

- You live with the patient and help with daily activities.
- You are a neighbor or friend. You may run errands, cook meals or help with activities like child care.
- You are a long distance away, but continue to offer support. Maybe you stay connected with phone calls, emails and text messages.

Being a caregiver can involve a variety of emotions. Helping may be satisfying but it is also normal to feel sad or frustrated over challenges. Caregiving may involve more responsibility, financial obligations or restrictions, and time pressures. Feeling a loss of control is normal. These emotions can be overwhelming. There are ways to cope and care for your health.

Early Signs of Caregiver Stress:

- Changes in sleep or eating patterns
- Moodiness and Irritability
- Increased use of medications or alcohol to “relax”
- Flare up of your own medical problems or a new illness
- Chronic Fatigue
- Rough handling of the person you are caring for

What can you do if you find some of these things in your daily life? There are no easy answers, but sometimes even small things can help.

Tips for Coping

Acknowledge and Express Your Feelings. It can be helpful to write about your feelings, talk with a trusted friend or family member, or seek support from a counselor. Relaxation or meditation practices can also help.

Social Work provides support and free counseling. For more information, call 904-202-7300.

Take Care of Your Health

- Keep up with your own medical appointments and exams.
- Practice mindfulness and breathing exercises.
- Eat a balanced diet.
- Exercise.
- Rest.
- Laugh.

Set Realistic Goals

- Recognize what you can and cannot do.
- Set your priorities and follow through with them.
- Be flexible, and make changes if necessary.
- You need time to take breaks and rest, too.
- Utilize resources that are offered to help care for your loved one (medical devices, home care, or even a home companion)

Stay Informed

- Educate yourself about your loved one's condition and how to communicate effectively with doctors
- Talk with your loved one's care team and ask questions. It may be helpful to make a list of questions you want to ask before you go to appointments.
- Seek current and reliable information. Having a better understanding can help you make informed choices.

Talk with Your Family and Friends

- Let people know how you feel. Visits with friends and family may help you feel less alone.
- Schedule meetings from time to time to help family and friends understand what is happening.

Patient Education



- Ask them to share in the care responsibilities (laundry, cooking, cleaning, shopping, or just sitting with your loved one to have a moment to yourself)

Ask for Help

Often people want to help, but do not know what to do. Make a list of task ideas. Have the list ready when someone offers to help. Your list may include items such as:

- Run errands
- Cook meals or grocery shopping
- Do housework or pay bills.
- Consider asking others to take your loved one to an appointment
- Help care for children.

Seek Support

Join a support group. Groups can help caregivers feel connected to others and create valuable friendships. A support group can help you manage stress, share experiences and improve your caregiving skills.

Consider community resources. In-home care services or adult day care may help with cooking, cleaning, bathing, feeding, dressing, using the bathroom, and lifting or moving your loved one.

Ask your social worker or nurse navigator for help finding resources.

Resources for Caregivers

Caregiver Action Network
1-800-896-3650
www.caregiveraction.org

Family Caregiver Alliance
1-800-445-8106
www.caregiver.org

National Alliance for Caregiving
www.caregiving.org

Well Spouse Association
www.wellspouse.org