Article Side

Caregiver Burnout - from a San Diego Therapist by John Francies

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Caregivers are probably one of the most underappreciated and unrecognized group of volunteers. They work behind the scenes, engage in seemingly normal and everyday tasks, and usually go about their job quietly and unassumingly. But, behind the perception of stability and normalcy is often a very lonely, tired, stressed and scared person. Caregivers are so busy helping their loved ones, they frequently donâ€™t tend to themselves. If caregivers ignore their own physical, mental and emotional health for too long, they will most likely experience â€œcaregiver burnoutâ€•.

What Are the Signs of Caregiver Burnout?

1. Physical, mental and emotional fatigue and exhaustion.

2. Feelings of depression, overwhelm, irritability, impatience, resentment, guilt, hopelessness or helplessness.

3. Changes in eating and sleeping patterns.

4. Ignoring or putting aside your own home and work responsibilities.

5. Feeling unappreciated or that what you do isnâ€™t making a difference for the situation, health or happiness for whom youâ€™re caring.

6. Withdrawal from friends and social contacts.

How to Prevent and Reverse Caregiver Burnout

1. Have Clear Boundaries. Caregiving is a lengthy and demanding role requiring proper pacing and knowing what you can handle, how much of something you can endure and for how long. Itâ€™s important as a caregiver to know when to say, â€œnoâ€•. Often caregivers feel they must do everything and experience guilt at the thought of saying no. Having good boundaries is important to ensure that you can go the distance and not experience burnout. It is often necessary to call in other sources of support such as friends, family, palliative care, or even paid caregivers on occasion if you have the means. Saying â€œnoâ€• doesnâ€™t mean you donâ€™t care or donâ€™t want to help â€“ it m keep things in balance on your side so you can go the distance.

2. Have Time in Life of Your Own. Simply stated, this means having some fun and activities outside your role of caregiver. A little can go a long way. Many caregivers isolate themselves and stop engaging in activities they enjoy and stop socializing with friends. Itâ€™s important for the caregiver to maintain relationships and stay engaged with activities that are pleasurable and important to them to prevent burnout. Doing something for your own mental/physical well-being is a good example of why caregivers need to have boundaries as well.

3. Get Support. Caregivers tend to feel alone in their journey because their role is so different from most of those around them. Even talking to a friend feels futile because â€œnobody understandsâ€•. It is very helpful for the caregiver to connect with other people who understand. Going to a support group for caregivers, seeking out professional counseling with a knowledgeable therapist or finding an online community for caregivers are great ways to break the feeling of isolation and aloneness.

4. Eat Well and Exercise.

5. Know Youâ€™re Making a Difference. Often caregivers get frustrated because they feel their efforts are failing to improve the emotional or even physical state of the one they are caring. The difference a caregiver makes is huge, but the effects of support may be difficult to detect. Factors such as age, pain level, disease progression and cognitive ability effects whether the patient can directly express to the caregiver their gratitude. Often, patients take out their frustrations on the caregiver because they have the deepest level of trust and love with them. Although seemingly unfair, the caregiver that gives the most may also experience the most challenging behaviors from the patient. This is normal and doesnâ€™t mean youâ€™re unloved or ineffective. Know your gift of caregiving is priceless but the reaction from your loved one might not be what you expected.

Caregivers are very special people and their gift is priceless. The normal feelings described above and signs of burnout are difficult to avoid, but you can temper them, prevent them from taking over and balance yourself so you can care for yourself and your loved one. If youâ€™re a caregiver, try and not beat yourself up if you go through the normal thoughts and feelings associated with caregiver burnout. And, if you know a caregiver, perhaps consider sharing what you read with them.

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