

Live Healthy and Be Well!

Who cares for the Caregiver? We all should!

--Stephen Jarrard, MD, FACS

The idea for this column does not come from any one person, but is a result of talking with many of you, and my own personal interactions with patients and their families over the years. It is not a topic you will see defined well in medical textbooks, and there is no official diagnosis of this condition in the Behavioral Health diagnosis manual (DSM-IV). Yet, it is something that many of us know quite a bit about personally, or we know someone who is in this situation. Thus, we can all appreciate the difficult position that often has no ideal outcome for any of the individuals involved. What I am referring to is known by several names – caregiver fatigue, caregiver stress, and sometimes several symptoms lumped together and called caregiver syndrome. The term *syndrome* refers to a collection of symptoms commonly occurring together as a condition.

We see this situation most commonly in cases of progressive dementia, such as Alzheimer's, or when someone suffers a debilitating illness and requires almost constant care and supervision. In our society, this responsibility usually falls on family such as children or the spouse. This situation is fraught with the possibility of resentment developing in the relationship of the cared for and the caregiver. The old adage "...we hurt most the ones we love," is often very true in this case. The cared for person may feel guilty for being a burden, but this may manifest itself as "lashing out" or being angry at the caregiver trying to help them. Often, the caregiver may also feel some resentment about all the things they are "missing out" on while caring for their loved one, but then feel guilty if they do arrange some time to do something besides stay at home and take care of their loved one. What I want you to know is that both of these situations are very common – and if you are involved with this in any way, as a caregiver or supporting a caregiver, expect this to happen at some point.

If you are a caregiver, recognize the signs of caregiver stress which include irritability, difficulty sleeping, exhaustion, depression, anxiety, anger, denial, headaches, stomach problems, and feelings of despair. You may also feel unappreciated by the person you are caring for, and perhaps some resentment, if you have siblings or other family members, that you are the "only one" participating in the care of this person, and others are "getting off easy," and "...have no idea how hard this is..." Again, I want you to realize that if you are having these feelings, you are entirely NORMAL, and you are not a bad person or bad family member. This situation can be made doubly worse when the caregiver is a health care worker, and already involved in a full time job taking care of other people – possibly already approaching "burnout" from that job – and now they add the job of caring for a family member. If that describes you or someone you know, be especially aware of the above mentioned signs and symptoms.

There is another group of caregivers I would like to include in this topic, and I know there are many of you out there. This includes the group of family members, often grandparents or aunts/uncles, that are raising the children of another family member. You may already have raised your own children, and ready to enjoy your later years, and find yourself being a parent

again when you really just want to be a grandparent. Or, you may have your own family that you are responsible for, and then find that you may need to take on an additional load of caring for children of another. You are certainly caregivers in every sense of the word, and subject to the same stresses and frustrations of that group. Even though you may not always feel like it, you are doing a very good thing, and you will be blessed and rewarded in the long term for your care and compassion in a difficult situation. If this is your situation, realize that by providing stability and a loving home for those in need, or a loved one in decline who needs your care, you are doing a wonderful thing, and modeling the behavior of the Lord himself.

The first thing to realize is that you need regular, possibly even scheduled, “breaks” from the situation to help prevent burnout and fatigue. Do not feel guilty about doing this – it is very necessary. Realize that taking care of yourself and keeping yourself healthy and your attitude good is one of the best ways of taking care of your loved one! If you become too fatigued, exhausted, or “burned out,” then the care you provide will surely suffer. Look for community events, schedule lunch/dinner with friends, go run some errands, exercise, etc. – anything to just get a break from the routine that you face every day. How can you do this? Well...that is up to those of us who can help you by providing you a chance to do something and have some of “your” time for yourself. It may be a friend, a neighbor, another family member, fellow church members, or perhaps even a trained “sitter” or trained professional whose services may be offered. All of us need to realize that you need your own time and step up, unsolicited, and offer some blocks of time for you to be YOU. This can be such a valuable and appreciated service to help share the load and burden of these blessed caregivers.

If you are a caregiver of a person with a terminal condition, I would like to recommend that at some point in the timeline you consider use of a Hospice service. No, this does not mean you are “throwing in the towel,” or “giving up,” on your loved one. What it does mean is that you will benefit from the services of trained, compassionate professionals who can help both of you and your entire family – by taking some of the load from your tired shoulders. There are several such services in our area, ask your healthcare provider about this option, and at least get a visit and consultation. No one will force anything on you, but you will likely wish you had found out about this earlier.

We really do enjoy hearing from you with any questions, concerns, or ideas for future columns and/or health and wellness related issues for the *Georgia Mountain Laurel*. Please send an email to rabundoctor@gmail.com, or call Jamie at 706-782-0480, and we will be sure to consider your input. If you use Twitter, then follow us for health tips and wellness advice @rabundoctor. Until next month, live healthy and be well!