

It's the Holiday Season ... and the Season for Increased Caregiver Stress

By Terry Fries-Maloy, MSW, LISW

Holidays should be times to relax and enjoy the company of family and friends, but often they become overly stressful—creating tension and unhappiness—rather than being enjoyable events. If an individual is also caring for a frail or aging loved one, the expectations of family gatherings, of shopping and gift giving, of cooking and baking can become overwhelming and cause additional stress and worry for the caregiver.

Holiday stress may increase symptoms of “caregiver burnout”, a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion that may be accompanied by a decline in the caregiver’s mood, behavior and health. Burnout occurs when caregivers don't get the support they need or when they try to do more than they are able—physically, socially, emotionally or financially. Caregivers who are "burned out" may experience fatigue, stress, anxiety, and depression. Many caregivers feel guilty if they do not follow established holiday traditions in the family, even when life circumstances make the continuation of such traditions feel burdensome rather than joyful.

It is sometimes difficult for a caregiver to recognize his or her own level of burnout. The caregiver is often so focused on caring for their loved one that they tend to ignore their own feelings and needs. The following checklist may help the caregiver identify the signs and symptoms of caregiver stress:

1. Do you feel there is no time for relaxing visits and phone calls with close friends?
2. Have you lost interest in hobbies or activities that you previously enjoyed ?
3. Are you developing stress-related problems such as generalized muscle ache, headache, anxious feelings, forgetfulness or “fuzzy” thinking?
4. Do you find yourself using alcohol or drugs, including prescription medications, to relax or “cope”?
5. Are you coming down with colds, flu, and/or other illnesses more than usual?
6. Do you find yourself losing patience with those whom you love most?
7. Have you gained or lost weight unintentionally?
8. Do you have an unshakable feeling of sadness, despair or pessimism?
9. Do you become easily irritated, worried or overwhelmed over what others would view as minor problems?
10. Do you complain about lack of sleep, chronic insomnia or feeling tired all of the time?

If you answered 'yes' to any of the above questions, you may be experiencing holiday stress and caregiver burnout. There are steps that one can take to help to ease some of the pressures that often surface for caregivers, especially during the holiday season.

- Eat healthy foods and avoid overeating or skipping meals. Significant weight loss or weight gain may be a stress indicator.
- Exercise and catch a breath of fresh outdoor air, even if just for a few minutes each day. Learn the art of deep breathing for relaxation – it can provide a feeling of refreshment within minutes.
- Monitor your sleep patterns and get enough rest. Sleeping too much or too little or feeling tired most of the time can be an indication of stress related problems.
- Ask friends or family for specific help with the caregiving role. If a son, daughter or neighbor is not be able to provide hands-on care for your loved one, he or she may be able to help with gift buying and wrapping, holiday cards, cooking, cleaning or other holiday tasks. Family members may be able to reduce financial concerns by helping to pay for needed medications, supplies or services.
- Organize a 'pot luck' holiday gathering this year in which others contribute to the meal. Ask for assistance from others in developing the menu with a focus on one another's 'specialty' or favorite holiday recipes.
- Learn to say 'no' to nonessential requests that you feel will add to your feelings of stress. You may not be able to control what others ask of you, but you can control your response to those requests . Know that you are a good caregiver and doing the best you can do.
- Find someone or something in your life that makes you laugh and get a dose of laughter each day. Studies have shown that laughter can relax the body, boost the immune system, trigger the release of endorphins, the body's natural 'feel-good' chemicals, and protect the heart.
- Try not to set yourself up for disappointment by comparing this year's holiday season with the nostalgia of past holidays. Each holiday season is different and can be enjoyed in its' own way.
- Pay attention to your stress levels throughout the day especially as the holidays approach. If certain tasks or times of the day are more challenging than others, discuss with your loved one possible changes in your caregiving schedule such as helping with a bath in the afternoon instead of first thing in the morning. Prioritize, make lists and stick to a daily routine whenever possible.
- If you feel or others note a significant change in your mood, attitude or behavior it may be related to the stresses of caregiving. Discuss these feelings and observations with your physician or seek the help of a support group or other health care professional to learn about resources and coping strategies.
- The 'gift' you need this season and throughout the year may be the gift of time – time away from your caregiving responsibilities. Suggest to family members that they give you 'gift certificates' for respite care – either provided by one of them or by an agency that specializes in such care. And then use the gifted time to *do something for yourself*. You will be a better caregiver for your loved one during the holidays and throughout the year if you also take care of *YOU*.