

Are You Experiencing Caregiver Burden? *by Elizabeth Gonzalez, Ph.D. R.N., C.S., Associate Professor, School of Nursing, Drexel University, Hartford Foundation Scholar*

According to Rosalyn Carter, "There are four kinds of people in the world: those who have been Caregivers, those who are currently Caregivers, those who will become Caregivers, and those who need Caregivers." In the United States, it is estimated that 50 million people per year are actively involved in caregiving; assuming the roles of service provider, companion, advocate, and decision-maker. That number is expected to rise significantly as baby boomers live longer in the community. Of the 50 million people providing care, family Caregivers provide approximately 80% of the required personal care services.¹

Becoming an informal (unpaid) Caregiver is a transition that requires a restructuring of a person's goals, daily activities, and responsibilities. The transition has been described as "crossing a threshold whose other side is unexplored," "drifting into the role," "the point at which concern, visiting, and helping out become an unexpected career."²

Studies have shown that rewards and satisfaction co-exist with the stresses and strains of caring for a loved one. Caregiving can be time-consuming and difficult: it can generate conflicts between family responsibilities, maintaining employment, and finding time for pleasurable activities. Constantly trying to handle multiple and often conflicting responsibilities can generate feelings of resentment and "compassion fatigue." Caregivers may experience burden when the care recipient's needs for care increase, when there is lack of support, when financial resources are drained, or when Caregivers do not have time for themselves. The experience of burden can adversely affect the Caregiver's health status.

However, the effects of caregiving are not the same for all Caregivers. It has been suggested that some Caregivers are more vulnerable to burden and poor health because of advanced age, employment status, inadequate social support, the intensity of the care provided including bathing, dressing and transfers, and/or providing care to a care recipient who lives alone. Caring for a loved one with low levels of social support has been directly linked to the experience of caregiver burden.

Since caregiving can affect the quality of life and well being of a Caregiver, it is critical that family Caregivers recognize the emotional cues of burden. These cues should act like "red flags" to a family Caregiver that s/he may be experiencing some degree of burden. Emotional cues include feelings of anger, sadness, frustration, or irritability. If a Caregiver is burdened because of the demands of multiple care responsibilities, or lack of time for oneself, the Caregiver is more likely to benefit from in-home services that will directly provide the recipient with assistance and give the Caregiver respite to attend to her/his own needs. In contrast, a Caregiver who is most stressed because s/he believes the demands made by the care recipient are excessive may best be helped by learning more about the disease process, the family member's level of dependency, and appropriate levels of support.

Caregiving can give rise to new skills, strengths, experiences, and relationships. These outcomes are much more frequent if family Caregivers recognize the signs of Caregiver burden early and seek the appropriate type of assistance.

If you would like to answer a few questions to determine if you are experiencing caregiver burden, we have included a short questionnaire at www.CaringTimes.org that may help you decide whether to seek assistance now.

References:

1. Thompson, L., Long-term care: Support for family Caregivers [Issue Brief]. Washington, DC: Georgetown University, 2004.
2. Lund, M. (2005) Caregiver, Take Care. *Geriatric Nursing*, 26(3), 152-153.

Caregiver Reaction Questionnaire ¹

Becoming a Caregiver can impact your life in both positive and negative ways. Answer the following questions based on how much the following aspects of your life have changed because of your caregiving responsibilities. Place a √ in the column that most closely defines your experience.

	Yes	No
1. Do you have time for yourself?		
2. Do you have time for your own activities and chores?		
3. Do you have personal privacy?		
4. Do you have time to pursue personal interests?		
5. Do you go on vacation away from home?		
6. Do you have time for friends and other relatives?		
7. Is caring for him or her rewarding to you?		
8. Does caring for her or him add meaning to your life?		
9. Do you maintain contact with friends?		
10. Do you take care of your personal health?		
11. Do you eat healthy, nutritious meals?		
12. Do you exercise?		
13. Is your Care Recipient dependent on you?		
14. Does your Care Recipient make unreasonable requests of you?		
15. Is there stress in your relationship with your care recipient?		
16. Have you felt depressed about your relationship with your Care Recipient?		
17. Have you felt nervous about your relationship with your Care Recipient?		
18. Do you experience tension in your life?		
19. Do you feel resentful?		
20. Do you feel angry and frustrated?		
21. Do you feel tired or exhausted?		
22. Do you feel anxious about things?		
23. Do you have trouble sleeping?		
24. Do you feel depressed?		
25. Are you irritable?		

Review your answers to the questions above. If you put more checks in the shaded areas, you may want to consider speaking with someone about how you are feeling about your responsibilities as a Caregiver. If you feel you could benefit from further education, contact one of our experts by email. To locate an expert, click on the Educational Resources page of the website. If you feel you could benefit from respite services call *GRISWOLD SPECIAL CARE* at 888-777-7630 to talk about resources that are available to you.

¹ The above questions were abstracted from Montgomery R., Borgatta, E., & Borgatta, M (2000). Societal and Family Change in the Burden of Care. In W. Liu & H. Kendig (Eds). Who Should Care for the Elderly? An East-West Value Divide (p. 27-54). Singapore: The National University of Singapore Press.