

The Caregiver Link

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QUOTES

“Today is the tomorrow we worried about yesterday.”

-Author Unknown

“For man, autumn is a time of harvest, of gathering together. For nature, it is a time of sowing, of scattering abroad.”

-Edwin Way Teale

“Autumn, the year’s last, loveliest smile.”

-William Cullen Bryant

“Youth is like spring, an over praised season more remarkable for biting winds than genial breezes. Autumn is the mellower season, and what we lose in flowers we more than gain in fruits.”

- Samuel Butler

Rushing the Stress Season

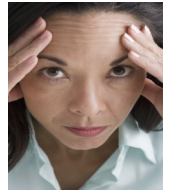
“Grandma, there’s Santa” four year old Jack observed from his perch in my shopping cart. I looked where he pointed, convinced he was mistaken. After all, I hadn’t yet gotten all the red, white and blue bunting removed from the deck after our Labor Day celebration. But, sure enough, there was a light up Santa followed on the shelves by lights, ornaments and the latest of “please, please, I want that” toys. I don’t care what anyone says, it is just too early for the stores to put up holiday displays.

On the other hand, it isn’t too early for caregivers, who deal with ultra-stress all year long, to polish up their **stress relief tool kits**.

Your first task may be to identify how you know you are stressed. This seems silly at first but has great importance. Each of us has a bodily stress early warning system. My back aches when I’m stressed (which is the explanation for why I’ve limped through every family member’s funeral I’ve attended). A friend of mine gets a tic in her left eye when something is bothering her. You may get stomach aches, headaches or muscle spasms. The point is, if we don’t listen to these first warnings to trouble ahead, our bodies will just “yell” louder and louder until we do listen. Unfortunately, we all too often are too busy or try to ignore these signals until we become truly ill. No one is best served by that result.

Next you need to ask yourself, “Where does my stress come from?” This isn’t as obvious as it sounds. Certainly your endless caregiving duties are pretty guaranteed to frazzle even the strongest among us. But, if you separate the individual parts of your duties, you may

find some stress, while others actually give you joy or at least a sense of satisfaction. For example, you may look forward to cooking special tempting meals for your loved one but dread talking to other family members, who are critical of your efforts. Both are part of the job called caregiving but each produces a very different response in you.



When you tease apart the big ball of stress called caregiving and find out exactly what bothers you, solutions may suggest themselves. In the above example, a caregiver could tell a critical family member, “When you comment on the things you feel I do wrong, I feel lost and defeated. For this reason, we will need to keep our conversations on a positive footing from now on or not have conversations.” If the person denies being critical, you can give specific examples of statements you found demeaning. Naturally, it takes courage to be this forthcoming but the results should be well worth the effort.

Let’s look more closely at the potential sources of stress in your life.

- ◆ **Emotional** – What is my stress style? Am I genetically prone to stressing over matters that roll off the backs of others? If this is the case, I will need to pay particular attention to my coping skills.
- ◆ **Event related** – One event that is causing stress for you is becoming a caregiver. But there may be other events that are piling on, causing you additional distress. For example, did you need to give up a job to become a caregiver? Have

Continued on page 3



CAREGIVING: RELIEF THROUGH SELF EXPRESSION

Start a personal journal and offer your care recipient a journal. Use a simple notebook or a book with blank or lined pages and a lovely cover.

Your journal may serve as a place to:

- Keep a **daily diary** of your experiences. Include anything of interest to you—some caregivers even include the weather and what was going on in the world that day.
- **List enjoyable activities** you can do to reward yourself or to get away from caregiving for short periods of time. Record something nice you did for yourself every day, choosing ideas from the list of enjoyable activities.
- **Vent rage or write poetry**—a private book in which you can write down your feelings of disappointment, sadness, anger and fear.
- **Record or glue inspirational verses and stories** you find in a daily text, magazines or caregiver newsletters.
- **Write down advice from other caregivers** you meet in your support group.
- **Glue, tape or staple in comic strips or copies of other humorous things** you have seen and want to look at again when you need cheering up.
- **Record moments in which love between you and your care recipient is expressed through quiet experiences you share**—watching the fish in your fishpond, feeding birds, or looking at an old photograph album together.

The person for whom you are caring may be physically challenged but mentally capable. Having a journal as a private place to express the feelings of helplessness, sadness and frustration that accompany the condition that has completely changed his or her life and dreams could be **emotionally healing**. If your care receiver has trouble writing, consider a tape recorder. There are small, inexpensive tape recorders that are fairly easy to use. Some are voice activated.

If your care receiver hesitates to express feelings in a journal, he or she might like to write down or record **stories and memories from his or her life**. Your care receiver might enjoy leaving this behind as a gift for family and friends, and recording these stories might lead to opening up to express other thoughts.

Art

In addition to journaling, you and your care recipient might enjoy art. There are journals with unlined pages, art sketch books with bigger pages, and paper, canvas, and other materials for drawing and painting. Other types of art such as working with clay might be helpful, too, and can be done by people with conditions such as dementia. Art could be an activity you do together. If your care recipient is able, many of the senior centers offer art classes. Dial 211 for a senior center in your area.

Local recreation departments also offer a variety of art classes, and some activities are offered for those who are physically or mentally challenged. Look for parks and recreation department or leisure services under your city in the blue government pages of the telephone book. Ask whether there are any therapeutic programs for people who are challenged.



Continued from page 1

there been problems in an important relationship with another loved one? Has someone close to you died recently? Strangely, even positive events, such as a wedding or a move to your dream home, cause stress. In fact, any change in your life causes stress until readjustment to it has been accomplished.

- ◆ **Work related** – If you are employed in addition to your caregiving duties, you may have another source for stress issues. Is your work place unhealthy or unsafe? Is management harsh? Are the pay and benefits below standard? Are you worried about losing your job because of the economy or because the caregiving calls on your time make you less reliable than you would wish to be?
- ◆ **Relational** – Are you involved in difficult relationships with your family, spouse or friends? Are others close to you not providing the caring and support you need?
- ◆ **Financial** – Are you having difficulty paying your bills? Do you lack health insurance and worry you, too, will get ill?
- ◆ **Health** – Are you struggling with health issues in addition to those of your loved one? Are you sleep deprived much of the time? Do you get the exercise you need? Are you eating properly?
- ◆ **System related** – Are you struggling with insurance companies over payments for your loved one's medical needs? Do public sources of support services deny you eligibility for what you need? Is the doctor or medical team slow to respond to your patient's changing situation?
- ◆ **Environmental** – Do you have proper housing and equipment to adequately care for your loved one? Are there transportation issues for doctor's appointments or therapy treatments?
- ◆ **Technology** – Are you being asked to provide technically advanced care for your loved one that you feel unprepared to render (this is an increasing problem in this world of managed care)?
- ◆ **News** – Television news is full of reports of crime and talking political heads.

You could probably add many other sources of stress. The issue is that we need to know what is stressing us before we can address it. To accomplish this, take a piece of paper or journal and write down all the specific sources of stress you can identify. Then put a star by the items you can't do anything about. Then look at the other stressors and name at least one thing you can do to reduce each.

For example, the news may make your stomach churn but

you can choose not to watch it. That's an easy one. If the insurance company is driving you nuts, assign another family the task of dealing with them (perhaps that really critical individual). Every item you can remove from your stress list will provide much needed improvement.

Once you have experienced some success in reducing the stress in your life, go back to your original list. Tackle some of the starred items for which you thought there was no solution. You will probably find that you starred too many items because you were overburdened and discouraged. It is likely you will find there are solutions to other matters you previously considered hopeless.

Stress is just too big a topic to tackle in one article. Next month, we will give you a menu of stress reduction techniques that cost nothing and are easy to do during a busy day of caregiving. In addition, we will focus on designing your own stress relief tool kit for today, tomorrow and for a less stressed future.

By Andrea Heeres

Healthy ways to relax and recharge

- * Go for a walk
- * Call a good friend
- * Get a massage
- * Take a long bath
- * Listen to music
- * Light scented candles
- * Savor a cup of coffee or tea
- * Work in your garden
- * Spend time in nature
- * Play with a pet
- * Write in your journal
- * Curl up with a good book
- * Watch a comedy
- * Sweat out tension with a good workout

Don't get so caught up in the hustle and bustle of life that you forget to take care of your own needs. Nurturing yourself is a necessity, not a luxury.

- * **Set aside relaxation time.** Include rest and relaxation in your daily schedule. Don't allow other obligations to encroach. This is your time to take a break from all responsibilities and recharge your batteries.
- * **Connect with others.** Spend time with positive people who enhance your life. A strong support system will buffer you from the negative effects of stress.
- * **Do something you enjoy every day.** Make time for leisure activities that bring you joy, whether it be stargazing, playing the piano or working on your bike.
- * **Keep your sense of humor.** This includes the ability to laugh at yourself. The act of laughing helps your body fight stress in a number of ways.

Return Service Requested

**The Mission Of Senior Resources
An Area Agency on Aging**

To provide a comprehensive and coordinated system of services designed to promote the independence and dignity of older persons and their families in Muskegon, Oceana, and Ottawa counties — a mission compelling us to target older persons in greatest need but to advocate for all.

**To contact us, please call
Amy or Mary at:**

October's website: <http://www.nia.nih.gov/alzheimers>

Continued from page 2

Photographs and Videos

While you may feel that there are no reasons to take photographs or nothing to celebrate anymore, it is a good idea to keep cameras handy and be ready to make a record of this time spent together. Photographs may be a source of peace for you and meaningful to family and friends. Consider organizing these into a photo album or scrapbook. Digital photographs may be e-mailed to relatives and friends and can also be printed.

An audiotape or video recording (VHS or DVD) can be a treasure, too, especially if you record your care receiver's voice.

Taken from Area Agency on Aging
—Pasco website

Readers Corner:

The Circle by Sally Smith

A personal account of the emotional and human side of dealing with dementia. "*The Circle*" is unique in that it addresses the emotional and human side of dealing with dementia while most available books concentrate on impersonal medical practicalities. "There is a need for such a book," said Debbie Bordeau, MUSC's development director for Neurosciences and the Center on Aging. "Consider that within a year, 10,000 people will turn 60 every day in the United States. This aging rate is expected to continue for the next 20 years."

