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Sue Ann Says: Stress Affects Women Caregivers

With over 34 million unpaid caregivers in the United States, we need to look at how the role as a caregiver affects a woman's life, health, family relationships and economic status. Often women take on the role as caregiver because they feel it is their obligation as a loving mother, wife, or daughter to care for other family members. The Centers for Disease Control reports that over half (53%) of caregivers said their own health had gotten worse due to their duties as a caregiver. If women caregivers are struggling with their health, finances and family relationships, we need to help them find coping mechanisms. If you are a caregiver, I want to provide information this month that could help you through stressful times. If you are not a caregiver, read and see if you can find ways to support caregivers in your family or community.

Who qualifies as a caregiver?

A caregiver is a person over the age of 18 who gives unpaid care to another person. The caregiving can be between an adult and an elderly parent, a spouse caring for a husband or wife, or parents caring for disabled adult children. The care may include supervision, household cleaning, cooking, personal hygiene or dispensing of a prescribed medication on time.

Seven Alarming Facts about Women Caregivers

The Family Caregiver Alliance (http://www.caregiver.org) shared these facts:

- Sixty-six percent of caregivers are females.
- The average age of a caregiver is 49.
- Women caregivers are 2.5 times more likely to live in poverty vs non-caregivers.
- Twenty percent of caregivers changed from working full-time to part-time
- Women caregivers have approximately $40,000 less in their retirement funds compared to men.
- Twenty-five percent of caregiving women have health problems due to their time spent caregiving.
- Women caregivers are six times more likely to suffer from depression or anxiety than non-caregivers.
Stress Impacts Caregivers’ Lives and Health

Caregiving does not come with an instruction manual that provides steps to deal with difficult situations. As a daily caregiver, stress will whittle away at your physical and emotional health. You may feel exhaustion, anger, guilt or frustration all within the same day. Women caregivers show more signs of depression, heart conditions, diabetes, weak immune systems, and have a greater risk for obesity. If you are a caregiver, you need to be aware of your own body so that you know when something isn’t “quite right” that it is time to see your health provider for a check-up. Waiting puts your own health at risk and suddenly you are unavailable to help your loved ones.

Stress not only comes from the extra workload, but from financial strain. If you cut back on your work hours, it affects your paycheck and future retirement funds. If you spend years out of the workforce, when you return to work you may not be able to return to your same income level immediately. Bills still have to be paid, medications purchased and food put on the table. Disagreements over money issues just increase stress.

Do You Need A Break?

Ask yourself these questions to determine if you are putting your own health at risk due to stress from caregiving.

- Do you feel exhausted, overwhelmed, and anxious?
- Are you lacking sleep?
- Are you gaining or losing weight?
- Are you abusing alcohol or drugs?
- Do you anger easily?

If you find yourself answering yes to these questions it is time to locate options to help you through these difficult times.

How Can I Take Care of Myself If I Am A Caregiver?

Reducing your stress load is one way to improve your overall health. Finding a place or person to provide respite care in your area is essential.

If you have other family members in the area, seek out their help and create a care schedule to lighten the load. Another option is in-home respite care where someone will stay for a day or a number of hours so you can get a break. There may also be an adult day-care center in the community. If you need a longer break you need to check out the short-term nursing homes that provide care locally.
Significant stress relief requires scheduling time for yourself each week to do something you love (sports, movies, crafting, reading, baking, etc.). Eat healthy and get eight hours of sleep each night. Find the courage to say “NO” to other obligations such as hosting book club, chairing a meeting, or babysitting the neighbor’s children.

**Who Can I Contact to Receive Help?**

When you are in need of a break, want to talk with others going through the same issues, or need answers for difficult questions, seek out your local agencies! Some agencies provide transportation, meals, housekeeping, and financial counseling as well as respite opportunities.

Contact:

- Your local Aging & Disability Resource Center (www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/adrc)
- The Wisconsin Family Caregiver Support Programs (www.wisconsincaregiver.org/)

Your health ultimately affects the ones you love. If you are a caregiver, it is vital that you find time to relax, refresh, rejuvenate and regroup so that you are able to continue helping your loved ones as a strong, healthy woman. If you know a woman caregiver who needs help, be the first one to reach out to her. We are stronger when we support each other!

**Because it all begins with a healthy woman...**

*Sue Ann Thompson is founder and president of the Wisconsin Women’s Health Foundation (WWHF), a statewide non-profit organization whose mission is to help Wisconsin women and their families reach their healthiest potential. WWHF provides programs and conducts forums that focus on education, prevention, and early detection; connects individuals to health resources; produces and distributes the most up-to-date health education and resource materials; and, awards grants and scholarships to women health researchers and related community non-profits. To learn more, visit wwhf.org or call 1-800-448-5148.*