

# Tips on Reducing Stress for Family Caregivers

Caregiving provided to aging family members is often associated with stress and burnout. Although providing direct care to an adult family member can result in significant stress, it should also be remembered that this experience can have positive benefits as well. Both the rewards and the challenges of the caregiving experience should be honestly considered.

**Sean Brotherson, Ph.D.**  
Family Science Specialist  
NDSU Extension Service

**Marlys Bratteli, Ph.D.**  
Assistant Professor of Gerontology  
North Dakota State University

**NDSU**  
**Extension Service**

North Dakota State University  
Fargo, North Dakota 58105

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## Suggested Benefits of Caregiving

It can be helpful to discuss how the caregiving experience has provided positive benefits to both the caregiver and the care recipient. This focus on the positive aspects of the experience can help give perspective and needed hope when stress increases. According to research, there are specific positive things associated with caregiving by many who pass through this experience.

### Positive Benefits to the Caregiver

- Developing closer relationships with the person they care for and having sufficient time to be together
- Increased understanding of a parent or family member and the ability to forgive or heal past difficulties
- Greater patience with individuals and life challenges
- Personal growth as an individual due to being challenged and stretched in emotional and other ways

### Positive Benefits to the Care Recipient

- Opportunity to receive assistance in a setting that is caring and personal
- Greater individualized care and attention than in other work settings
- Sharing of life experiences and close relationships with people who are close to them and who they appreciate

## Areas of Stress Impact Related to Family Caregiving

The caregiving experience does impose demands on family members, and at times they may need to deal with significant levels of stress. Identifying specific areas of stress in caregiving allows for intervention to reduce or alleviate stress as it continues.

- **Physical Demands** – direct care, lifting, bathing, feeding, etc.
- **Financial Demands** – medical costs, equipment, hired help, lost income
- **Emotional Burdens** – feeling isolated, alone, without time for oneself
- **Relationship Challenges** – sibling conflict, conflict with dependent adult, etc.

**Caregiving involves providing direct physical and emotional support to a family member or other adult who has become dependent and needs some care and assistance.** The level of caregiving can vary from occasional monitoring of how a person is doing to full-time, round-the-clock care for a bed-bound individual. Caregiving can be a healthy and

fulfilling experience. However, at times it can also bring burdens that lead to stress, exhaustion, anger, and even abuse. Awareness of the stresses that may accompany caregiving and tips for dealing with such stresses can be helpful to caregivers and family members.

## 1 – Physical Demands and Direct Care as a Source of Stress

Caregiving often involves basic, practical aspects of care such as helping someone bathe or dress, moving from a bed to a wheelchair, or other physical demands. When these tasks are performed for a dependent adult, the resulting demands and labor can be challenging and stressful to a caregiver. Stress sources of physical demands and suggested coping tips include:

### Stress Sources of Physical Demands

- Creating a safe physical environment, preventing falls
- Providing first aid and medical assistance as possible
- Bathing a care recipient
- Assisting with oral hygiene
- Dressing a care recipient
- Assisting with toileting needs
- Feeding or assistance with eating, nutrition needs
- Meal planning and preparation
- Lifting, turning, or transferring a care recipient
- Routine housework
- Management of behavior with care recipients who have cognitive impairment
- Other physical challenges

### Suggested Coping Tips

- Learn how to properly care for your family member. Get training so you know how to perform needed skills, which will make your work easier and safer.
- Practice healthy habits, including a balanced diet, regular exercise, sufficient sleep, and visits to the doctor.
- When needed, get help with physical tasks from other care providers, neighbors, or sources of help.
- Work to keep your care recipient as independent as possible to reduce your stress and maintain dignity.
- Utilize adaptive or assistive equipment with specific needs.

### Tips on Caring for Yourself

Plan ahead for those times when you will be stressed as a caregiver. It happens to everyone. If you have a plan of action, you will be better prepared to deal with stress so it does not interfere in your life or the care you are providing. No one will be helped if you become sick from too much stress. A few tips include:

- Take a walk or ride a bike
- Take a bubble bath
- Engage in a favorite activity
- Allow for some quiet personal time
- Read a favorite book
- Talk with a friend
- Listen to soothing music
- Watch the sunset
- Share favorite memories with a friend
- Watch a favorite movie

## 2 – Financial Demands and Management as a Source of Stress

Caregiving often takes a financial toll on caregivers and families. Financial demands that caregivers experience may include costs of medical care or payment for hired help. Also, at times caregivers can become directly involved in management of a person's financial affairs with banking, saving, or other issues. Stress sources of financial demands and suggested coping tips include:

### Stress Sources of Financial Demands

- Costs of medical care and treatment
- Costs of adaptive or assistive equipment that is needed
- Costs of hired help
- Lost income
- Reduced work hours
- Loss of employee benefits
- Management of financial concerns for care recipients
- Planning for long-term care financial needs

### Suggested Coping Tips

- Evaluate and utilize programs that assist with medical and treatment costs related to family caregiving.
- Identify programs that provide assistive technology at reduced fees or on loan.
- Discuss financial needs and impacts with other family members.
- Plan ahead for projected medical costs or treatment needs.
- Work with financial planning specialists as needed.

## 3 – Emotional Burdens as a Source of Stress

Caregiving can be a tiresome experience that feels emotionally challenging, especially if it continues over an extended period. Emotional demands are the hidden cost of caregiving and may be the most severe in their stress impact. Stress sources of emotional demands and suggested coping tips include:

### Stress Sources of Emotional Demands

- Feeling alone, unaided or unappreciated
- A sense of isolation and frustration
- Insufficient time for oneself and personal activities
- Fatigue and emotional irritability
- Anger or frustration at perceived unfairness of a situation
- Discouragement or personal depression
- Loss of opportunities
- Feeling overburdened with demands from care recipient or others
- Lack of control over circumstances

### Suggested Coping Tips

- Find someone you trust and talk about your feelings or frustrations.
- Be realistic about the demands of caregiving and turn to others for help.
- Set aside time for self-care and personal renewal.
- Take advantage of respite care services and get a break for a few hours or a couple of days.
- Join a caregiver support group so you can share feelings, learn about resources, and reduce stress.
- Get assistance from others.

## 4 – Relationship Challenges as a Source of Stress

Caregiving changes the normal patterns of family life and can sometimes result in relationship challenges that make life more stressful. For example, adult siblings may disagree about a care plan or an adult child and dependent parent might have conflict about the level of care or monitoring required. Stress sources of relationship challenges and suggested coping tips include:

### Stress Sources of Relationship Challenges

- Feeling overburdened by care responsibilities so you become resentful of the care recipient
- Conflict with care recipient about care demands or plans
- Disagreement with family members about care responsibilities or plans
- Insufficient time and energy for other family relationships
- Difficulties with spouse due to care demands
- Criticism or lack of help from other family members related to caregiving
- Limited communication about needs

### Suggested Coping Tips

- Focus on positive experiences with the care recipient such as sharing memories or doing a life story.
- Involve the care recipient as much as possible in discussion of guidelines for care.
- Express needs and issues clearly to other family members related to caregiving responsibilities.
- Take time for other family relationships.
- Participate in a support network for caregivers and get respite care.
- Have each family member participate in caregiving and express appreciation for each other.

## The North Dakota Family Caregiver Project

The North Dakota Family Caregiver Project has in-depth training and educational materials to assist caregivers and community professionals with issues of family caregiving. These materials can be accessed on the Internet at [www.ndsu.nodak.edu/ndsu/caregiver/education/index.html](http://www.ndsu.nodak.edu/ndsu/caregiver/education/index.html)

Training manuals, handouts, and materials available include:

- How We Age
- Personal Care Tasks
- Family Relations and Caregiving
- End of Life Issues
- Caregiver Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation
- Assistive Technology and Older Adults
- Behavior Management
- Personal Care Challenges
- Nutrition Counseling
- Caregiver Stress and Coping
- Financial Counseling and Planning

**For more information on this and other topics, see: [www.ag.ndsu.edu](http://www.ag.ndsu.edu)**

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