

Tips to Stay Healthy While Caring for a Spouse

As we grow older and need help with the activities of daily living, many of us depend on a stronger, healthier spouse for assistance. Doing so may allow a couple to stay together and “age in place” in their own home. Unfortunately, many elder caregivers fail to realize how challenging and stressful such a responsibility can be -- especially if the one being cared for is suffering from some level of dementia and requires constant monitoring.

If you are a caregiving spouse, please consider the following suggestions to maintain your ability to care for a loved one:

- **Don't hesitate to** ask your children for help. Most children want to help, but don't offer because they *believe it* when Mom or Dad tells them everything's just fine. Even if children are a distance away, they can contribute in many ways that will lessen the load of caregiving.
- **Keep your spouse** involved with decisions about his or her care, but don't ignore the effect on you. For example, the best setting for rehabilitation after a stroke could be an acute-care rehab hospital, skilled nursing facility, or in your own home, with or without home healthcare. How would each option affect you? If your spouse goes to a facility, do you have transportation so you can visit regularly? Are you up to the physical demands of caregiving? What help will you need if your spouse stays at home?
- **Give yourself permission** to have time for yourself. Find adult daycare centers; or ask for relief from family, friends, neighbors, or faith families; or check respite care providers for rates (interview several individuals for someone who's compatible with your loved one). Then enjoy your “me time” – take a walk, have lunch with a friend, get a massage or haircut, window shop or do anything that has nothing to do with caregiving!
- **Take care of** your own health. It's easy to fall into the trap of neglecting yourself while caring for a spouse. Remind yourself that it will not help your spouse if you become ill, too.
- **Prepare yourself for** the difficult day your spouse may eventually need 24-hour monitoring, specialized medical or nursing care, or can no longer transfer from bed to chair or toilet – and you will need to consider professional home care assistance or a change in living arrangements. Be aware that if your spouse becomes violent, due to some types of dementia, you may not have the skills needed to manage his or her behavior, and you may be in danger of injury yourself.

The times you are under the severest stress are the times you will most need your sense of humor to carry you through. Some of the daily things you do as a caregiver can be just plain funny. Look for humor in daily events, read funny stories, and remember that laughter is healing. Laugh with your spouse – it will make both of you happier.

For more information:

- National Family Caregivers Association (NFCA), www.nfcacares.org, 1-800-896-3650, supports family caregivers and promotes self-advocacy and self-care.
- Administration on Aging (AoA), www.aoa.org, 1-800-677-1116. Find information on caregiving, including Eldercare Locator that finds local assistance for seniors. Select “search” on the top bar and enter “caregivers for information and additional resources.

###