Unpaid Family Caregiving

Unpaid family caregiving is an activity that is limitless. It covers a broad spectrum of ages, genders, race/ethnicities and relationship types.

A report by the Alzheimer’s Association (2004) indicated that 28 % of caregivers not only provide care for senior loved ones, they also provide care to their children or grandchildren residing in the home. This “sandwich generation”- caregivers caring for older and younger loved ones simultaneously - reported higher levels of emotional stress, anxiety, depression, and declining physical health. In fact, of caregivers for people with dementia, 55 % reported less time for other family members; 49 % give up vacations, hobbies and other social activities, 30 % get less exercise than before taking on care giving responsibilities.

The National Alliance of Caregiving working with AARP, provided a report in June 2015 that outlined statistics of caregivers in America and factors that are important in considering when looking at caregiver responsibilities and self-care.

An estimated 43.5 million adults in the United States have provided unpaid care to an adult or child within the past 12 months of the survey (conducted in 2014). 34.2 million Americans provide care for adults age 50 or older. On average, caregivers spend 24.4 hours a week providing care for a loved one. Imagine how that may cause distress for a person who also has children they care for as well as a job outside of the home. The higher the number of hours a caregiver gives for care, the more likely they are to experience emotional stress, physical and financial strain, and negative impact on their health.

Over half of caregivers surveyed reported they had no other option than to assume caregiver responsibility. Often, these individuals find themselves in highly complex care situations resulting in an increase in stress for them. The longer a caregiver provides care, the higher the likelihood is that he or she will begin to notice a decline in their own health.

People who perform long hours of caregiving have a greater need to speak with a health care provider about their own needs. However, they often fail to do so because their initial concern is discussing the needs of their loved one. Their need for self-care support often goes unaddressed, leading to higher levels of stress which can lead to increased incidents of worsening health.

This information emphasizes the need for caregivers to be aware to their own needs as well as the needs of those they are caring for. Maintaining hobbies, relationships, boundaries, physical health and mental health is essential for caregivers. However, many may misinterpret this attention to themselves as being “selfish”. On the contrary, the caregiver should seek help from health care providers including physicians and/or mental health therapists. Health care providers can assist with resources and strategies to aid caregivers to realize what they need to self-rejuvenate.

Remember, this is not selfishness, but rather much needed and deserved “self-care”