

The American Counseling Association's "*Counseling Corner*" Weekly Columns

Learning To Care For Yourself When Caring For Another

from the American Counseling Association

Taking care of a loved one is not an uncommon occurrence these days. Lifestyle changes and medical advances have more people living longer, but sometimes without the ability to safely handle the challenges of daily living themselves.

It isn't simply an aging population that is expanding the need for caregivers. Many families have members who may have mental or physical impairments, or serious, debilitating health issues. And while there are a growing number of facilities and organizations that can provide care, they are often out of the financial reach of many families or go against a family's wishes to personally provide the needed care for a loved one.

The result is that many people find themselves in the role of family caregiver, a role that can often be close to a 24-hour, 7-day a week job. Unfortunately, many of those providing family care often fail to realize or choose to ignore the toll that such an obligation, along with other family or work requirements, can have on them.

While there are no easy solutions to such situations, there are things that can be done to help family caregivers take better care of themselves.

In many cities, it is possible to find businesses, organizations or individuals who can provide what is called "respite" care. This is when someone comes in for a few hours, maybe once or several times a week, in order to give the primary caregiver a much-needed break. Such services, however, can be hard to find in many places, especially smaller towns and rural areas, and may be prohibitively expensive if they are available.

The alternative is for the individual providing the care to learn to care better for himself or herself, to essentially work out a "personal respite" program.

This can take a variety of forms, from just scheduling a short break to have a cup of tea or read a book, to turning to friends and other family members for their assistance in providing the help that will give the caretaker a few hours of personal time.

While family caregivers tend to be concerned, giving people, it's vital for them to monitor their own mental and physical well-being, too. Failing to recognize when the stress of helping is having a negative impact on their patience or ability to think clearly or respond appropriately can lead to serious and unexpected issues.

"Counseling Corner" is provided by the American Counseling Association. Comments and questions to ACAcorner@counseling.org or visit the ACA website at www.counseling.org.

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