

Caring for a person with mental illness

According to Mental Health America, there are 60 million Americans who provide unpaid care to a family member, friend, or neighbor who has a physical or mental illness. This number is expected to increase over the next few years as the baby boomer generation ages into their senior years.

A caregiver doesn't necessarily have to be an adult, non-working parent. Here is a breakdown of the caregiver demographics.

- The largest group of caregivers is working and is in their middle-aged adult years. They often care for a child with disabilities and/or a parent with disabilities. Those people who are taking care of both a child and parent are considered to be in the sandwich caregiver group.
- Children ages 8-18 years make up 1.5 million of America's caregivers. These children are typically taking care of a parent or sibling.
- College-age students also make up a large portion of caregivers. One out of three caregivers are between the ages of 18-29 years old.
- Grandparents are also commonly caregivers. There are about 2.7 million grandparents who care for their spouse, children, grandchildren, or friends. Many of these individuals face substantial health challenges themselves while providing care for others.

Being a caregiver comes with difficulties but can be a very rewarding experience. Caregivers – particularly family members – often feel responsible or may be held responsible by legal and social service systems. As a caregiver, it is important to be educated not only about how to help the person you care for, but also to help yourself. The burden of care can be substantial, and often lasts a lifetime.

Caregivers are more likely to have physical and mental health illnesses, a higher financial burden, and require

work accommodations. On a more positive side, those who are caregivers report having a high degree of self-confidence. They also report that they learn new skills and can strengthen their relationship with others by being more sympathetic.

Signs of caregiver stress

As a caregiver, you may be so focused on your loved one that you don't realize that your own health and well-being are suffering. Watch for these signs of caregiver stress:

- Feeling overwhelmed or constantly worried
- Feeling tired often
- Getting too much sleep or not enough sleep
- Gaining or losing weight
- Becoming easily irritated or angry
- Losing interest in activities you used to enjoy
- Feeling sad
- Having frequent headaches, bodily pain or other physical problems
- Abusing alcohol or drugs, including prescription medications

Too much stress, especially over a long time, can harm your health. As a caregiver, you're more likely to experience symptoms of depression or anxiety. In addition, you may not get enough sleep or physical activity, or eat a balanced diet — which increases your risk of medical problems, such as heart disease and diabetes.

Strategies for dealing with caregiver stress

The emotional and physical demands involved with caregiving can strain even the most resilient person. That's why it's so important to take advantage of the many resources and tools available to help you provide care for your loved one. Remember, if you don't take care of yourself, you won't be able to care for anyone else.

To help manage caregiver stress:

- Accept help. Be prepared with a list of ways that others can help you, and let the helper choose what he or she would like to do. For instance, a friend may offer to take the person you care for on a walk a couple of times a week. Or a friend or family member may be able to run an errand, pick up your groceries or cook for you.
- Focus on what you can provide. It's normal to feel guilty sometimes but understand that no one is a "perfect" caregiver. Believe that you are doing the best you can and making the best decisions you can at any given time.
- Set realistic goals. Break large tasks into smaller steps that you can do one at a time. Prioritize, make lists and establish a daily routine. Begin to say no to requests that are draining, such as hosting holiday meals.
- Get connected. Find out about caregiving resources in your community. Many communities have classes specifically about the disease your loved one is facing. Caregiving services such as transportation, meal delivery or housekeeping may be available.
- Join a support group. A support group can provide validation and encouragement, as well as problem-solving strategies for difficult situations. People in support groups understand what you may be going through. A support group can also be a good place to create meaningful friendships.
- Seek social support. Try to stay well-connected with family and friends who can offer nonjudgmental emotional support. Set aside time each week for connecting, even if it's just a walk with a friend.
- Set personal health goals. For example, set goals to establish a good sleep routine, find time to be physically active on most days of the week, eat a healthy diet and drink plenty of water.
- Many caregivers have issues with sleeping. Not getting quality sleep over a long period of time can cause health issues. If you have trouble getting a good night's sleep, talk to your doctor.
- See your doctor. Get recommended vaccinations and screenings. Make sure to tell your doctor that you're a caregiver. Don't hesitate to mention any concerns or symptoms you have.

The nature of being a caregiver is to be concerned about the health and wellness of others, but it should not come at the expense of self-care. It is important to take care of yourself by getting enough sleep, eating right, exercising, taking time out for yourself, and seeking professional help if needed.

Help is available. For additional information, visit [MagellanHealth.com/MYMH](https://www.MagellanHealth.com/MYMH)

Sources: American Psychological Association, Mayo Clinic, Mental Health America