



**Michigan Office of Services to the Aging  
Issue Alert  
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**Caregiver Tips: Part Two**

**Managing Stress & Preventing Abusive Situations  
in Informal Caregiving**

Friends and family members provide the primary source of care for nearly three-quarters of impaired older adults living in the community. Providing high levels of care to another individual can be both physically and emotionally demanding. While the majority of caregivers are meeting the challenge and doing an excellent job, the reports of abuse by caregivers appears to be on the rise. How large is the problem of caregiver abuse? Researchers estimate that anywhere from 5% - 23% of all caregivers are abusive. Most professionals in this field agree that caregiver abuse is related to the stresses associated with providing such care.

Stress is a normal reaction. It is the body's "fight or flight" response to danger. When the body wants to protect itself, it goes into "high alert mode." As a result, essential functions, such as respiration and heart rate speed up, while less essential functions, such as the immune system, shut down. Although stress is a normal reaction, the body must repair itself once the danger is removed. For caregivers whose stress results from fatigue or persistent conflicts, their bodies never get an opportunity to heal. As a result, their immune systems are not functioning fully, and they are at increased risk for infections and disease.

Not all caregivers experience stress in the same way. Some caregivers may experience very little stress, while others a great amount. These differences can be explained by subjective factors, such as how caregivers feel about providing care, their current and past relationships with those they care for, and their coping abilities. Some behaviors on the part of care receivers can be particularly stressful, as well. These behaviors include aggression, combativeness, wandering tendencies and incontinence.

Many of the same factors that are believed to cause caregivers stress also raise the risk for abuse, although the link between the two issues is not yet fully understood. More research is needed to understand what factors predict caregiver abuse. There are, however, some factors that may be cause for concern. The following are red flags to watch for:

**THE CAREGIVER**

- Fears that he/she will become violent
- Suffers from low self-esteem
- Perceives that he/she is not receiving adequate help or support from others
- Views caregiving as a burden
- Experiences emotional and mental burnout, anxiety or severe depression.
- Feels 'caught in the middle' by providing care to children and to older family members at the same time.
- Has 'old anger' or unresolved issues with the care receiver.

## THE CARE RECEIVER

- Behaves aggressively or combatively
- Is verbally abusive
- Exhibits disturbing behaviors such as sexual acting out or embarrassing public displays

## THE CAREGIVER AND CARE RECEIVER

- Live together
- Had a poor relationship prior to the onset of the illness or disabling condition.
- Are married and have a marital relationship that is characterized by conflict.

The good news is that there is help for caregivers. Social and support services, including support groups, respite care, home delivered meals, adult day services, and assessment services can help reduce the stressors associated with abuse. Hiring helpers, such as attendants, chore workers, homemakers, or personal care attendants also lifts some of the burden off the primary caregiver. Public assistance may be available for those who can't afford to hire helpers.

Developing relationships with other caregivers is also beneficial. It has been shown that caregivers with strong emotional support from other caregivers are less likely to report stress or fear that they will become abusive. Stay Healthy! Exercise, relaxation, good nutrition and adequate rest have all been shown to help caregivers manage their stressful situations better.

It is important for caregivers to learn to recognize their *triggers*, those factors that cause them the greatest stress and anxiety. Similarly, learning about the causes of difficult behaviors and techniques for handling these behaviors can greatly reduce stress.

Planning for the future also relieves stress by reducing uncertainty, preserving resources and preventing financial crises from occurring. A variety of instruments exist to help plan for the future, including Power of Attorneys, Advanced Directives for Health Care, Trusts and Wills.

Here are some of the agencies and resources that exist to help caregivers manage:

- *Preventing Stress from Becoming Harmful: A Guide for Individuals who care for persons with Dementia*, from the Office of Geriatric Medicine/Gerontology, Northeastern Ohio Universities College of Medicine, call (330) 325-6359, or via email at [brp@neoucom.edu](mailto:brp@neoucom.edu).
- *A Caregiver's Guide to Information and Resources*, available from AARP. Call (202) 434-AARP (020-434-2277).
- Family Caregiver Alliance: (415) 434-3388, web site [www.caregiver.org](http://www.caregiver.org)
- Alzheimer's Association: (800) 272-3900, web site [www.alz.org](http://www.alz.org). The local Greater Michigan Chapter can be reached at (800) 337-3827, web site [www.alzgm.org](http://www.alzgm.org).
- Your local Area Agency on Aging is a great resource for other services in your community.
- Local Community Colleges are also an excellent resource for classes and trainings.

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