

Taking Care of Others, Taking Care of Ourselves

By Virginia A. Barber, D.C., Palmer Chiropractic Clinics Faculty Clinician and Genesis Hospice Volunteer

November is National Caregivers Month, a time to recognize and celebrate the sacrifices and rewards of caring for those who are unable to care for themselves.

One of the most rewarding and challenging roles a person can take on is that of caregiver. To step into such a role is to take responsibility for the physical, social, medical, emotional, and/or financial needs of a loved one, often in addition to continuing to perform one's regular job and life duties. And, while caregiving can definitely be full of emotional and spiritual rewards for both the caregiver and the person being cared for, it can often lead to "caregiver stress" and ultimately "caregiver burnout." Finding an effective way to care for oneself while caring for another is the key to maintaining a healthy self.

A caregiver is defined as anyone who provides assistance on an ongoing basis to another person in need. Most commonly, the caregiver is an adult child providing care for an elderly parent, but the same relationship may exist with other relatives, spouses, friends, neighbors or disabled adult children. Those of us who provide such care without being paid are known as "informal caregivers" or "family caregivers." We "family caregivers" provide approximately 80 percent of the long-term care in the United States. Sixty-one percent of us are women; most of us are middle-aged. Fifty-nine percent of us have jobs in addition to our caregiving duties. Clearly, we family caregivers have a workload and a stress load that can quickly get out of control, especially if we begin neglecting our own needs as we struggle to meet those of others.

Caregiver stress develops as we succumb to the emotional and physical demands of caregiving. We're tired all the time, but rarely feel as if we're caught up with our responsibilities. As a result, we feel guilty about not doing a better job caring for our loved one. We are frustrated and angry about what seem like endless or unreasonable demands, only to then feel terrible if we have "snapped" at our loved one. We're exhausted when we go to bed at night but either can't sleep, or wake up just as tired. We feel our world's narrowing at the same time that our responsibilities seem to broaden. In short, we're in trouble, and we're on the way to shutting down, or "caregiver burnout."

Research shows that caregivers are more likely to experience higher rates of certain health problems related to poorly-managed caregiver stress. For example, caregivers are more likely to have higher levels of stress hormones, obesity, depression, and anxiety, as well as more likely to have a long-term medical problem such as heart disease, cancer, diabetes or arthritis. When ill with an infectious disease, caregivers will be sick for more days than their non-caregiver counterparts. Part of the reason for this increased rate of

health problems is that caregivers are less likely to take good care of themselves because they are so busy taking good care of others!

Being aware of the signs of caregiver stress can alert the caregiver that it's time to start taking better care of themselves. Some of the most common signs are feeling overwhelmed; eating too much or too little; feeling constantly sad, worried, or angry; losing interest in favorite activities; and somatic or body symptoms such as headaches, neck pain, and other bodily aches and pains. By addressing rather than attempting to ignore these warning signals, the caregiver can start to restore their own sense of well-being, which in turn gives them more patience and compassion toward their loved one.

Chiropractic care is a well-known and popular treatment choice for many of the musculoskeletal manifestations of physical stress. The faculty of the Palmer Chiropractic Clinics have years of experience in providing gentle, safe, and effective treatment for headaches, neck pain and back pain (some of the most common physical signs of caregiver stress). We also are trained to provide useful techniques in stress reduction and lifestyle changes to help people better manage life's inevitable stressors. And finally, some of us are caregivers, too, so we are well-positioned to understand and empathize with the demands that caring for a loved one places upon them.

Please visit our website at www.palmer.edu/clinics/qc to find out more about how to allow us to help you take better care of yourself so that you can take better care of your loved one!