

What You Should Know About **The Stress of Caregiving at Midlife**

Midlife women often assume major responsibility for “informal” caregiving for children, spouses, parents, in-laws, or a mix of these individuals. Many of these women have jobs outside the home as well. Some family caregivers find personal growth and fulfillment from helping out, but many others report psychologic distress, interpersonal conflict, social isolation, sleep and eating disturbances, and a variety of physical ailments.

What are some of the negative effects of being a caregiver?

When caregivers sacrifice some of their own physical and emotional needs to help family members, they may end up with feelings of resentment, anxiety, loneliness, and fatigue, as well as a sense of guilt for feeling this way. On top of these distressing feelings, midlife women might be experiencing symptoms related to menopause at the same time—hot flashes, insomnia, and depression.

Another serious long-term effect for informal caregivers is financial. The financial toll results from loss of paid employment, resulting in forfeit of Social Security accrual, retirement benefits, and health insurance. The ramifications can be devastating.

What can I do to cope?

Support comes in many forms—anything from talking to friends or a counselor, taking a walk, writing in a journal, or practicing a hobby. Seek sources of connection and understanding rather than withdrawing and feeling isolated. Ask for help when you need it, and say no to requests that are too draining. You can still make choices about your life.

Exhaustion is a major cause of stress and illness for caregivers. Make sure you are getting enough sleep, having regular check-ups, exercising, and eating healthy foods. Taking better care of your health will make you a better caregiver for others. When you have feelings of guilt, remember that there is no such thing as a perfect caregiver. Occasional feelings of anger or frustration are normal. You need to take breaks from caregiving; otherwise, it is easy to become over-



whelmed and feel burned out. Having a life outside of the home can help you keep perspective.

Where can I learn more?

Here is a sampling of national resources for caregivers suggested by the American Medical Association's *Caregiver Health* pages (www.ama-assn.org):

- *Eldercare Locator*, 800-677-1116 (www.eldercare.gov)
- *Family Caregiver Alliance*, 415-434-3388 (www.caregiver.org)
- *Medicare Hotline*, 800-633-4227 (www.medicare.gov)
- *National Alliance for Caregiving*, 301-718-8444 (www.caregiving.org)
- *National Family Caregivers Association*, 800-896-3650 (www.nfcacares.org)