



Developing a Better Understanding

SUPPORTING CAREGIVERS THIS HOLIDAY SEASON

According to Mental Health America nearly 1 in 4 U.S. adults (approximately 63 million people) serve as family caregivers. Caregiving can provide joy and a sense of purpose, but it can also contribute to stress, exhaustion, and concern for both the caregiver's and the loved one's mental health. While many people picture a caregiver as someone who provides hands-on care for a disabled relative acting as a home nurse while managing finances, cooking, and cleaning not all caregivers have such an intensive role. Caregiving can take many forms, including offering support and encouragement, driving a loved one to appointments, assisting with treatment decisions, making legal or financial decisions on someone's behalf, helping obtain work or school accommodations, and managing crisis situations.

Caregivers can be parents, relatives, friends, partners, adult children, neighbors, or have some other kind of relationship to the person living with a health condition. Mental health caregiving is a marathon filled with hurdles, obstacles, twists, and turns. While everyone hopes their loved one will heal and progress, the reality is that recovery often includes both forward steps and setbacks. Taking time to acknowledge and accept the challenges that may lie ahead can help caregivers prepare for and manage difficulties as they arise.

Navigating the ups and downs of a loved one's recovery can be exhausting and stressful. Therefore, it is essential for caregivers to find healthy ways to cope with that stress. Some small, actionable strategies include:

- Practicing mindfulness, deep breathing, or meditation
- Going for a walk or spending time outside in nature
- Dancing or listening to music
- Creating art, writing, or engaging in another form of creative expression
- Connecting with and spending time with others

Making time for self-care is just as important as showing up for the person receiving care. Yet caregivers often place their own needs last. While their dedication is admirable, neglecting personal well-being for too long can heighten stress and fatigue. Small moments like a warm cup of coffee, a few minutes in the sunshine, or a thoughtful message from a friend can offer a meaningful lift. Even in the most difficult times, caregivers deserve opportunities to pause, breathe, and find peace. According to the National Alliance of Mental Illness (NAMI), an estimated 8.4 million Americans provide care to someone living with a mental illness, and fulfilling this role is challenging. To meet the demands of caregiving, individuals must also care for themselves, something that sounds simple but is often far from easy. Barriers such as limited time, difficulty finding resources, and the instinct to prioritize others can make self-care feel out of reach. However, tending to one's well-being is essential, not only for the caregiver but also for their loved one and the rest of the family.

Family caregivers often shoulder the weight of providing personal and instrumental care, managing household responsibilities, and responding to crises. They must recognize when they are tired, overwhelmed, or unable to continue without support. Caring for oneself includes identifying when help is needed to maintain physical, emotional, financial, social, and spiritual balance. Healthy eating also supports overall well-being and a caregiver's ability to provide effective support. Staying hydrated, minimizing alcohol during stressful periods, and prioritizing balanced meals can make a significant difference. Sleep is equally essential; while uninterrupted rest may not always be possible, caregivers can seek restorative naps or quiet breaks whenever they arise.

Caregiving can be an emotional journey. It is critical to recognize when you need emotional support from friends, family, or others who are on a similar journey. Knowing that you are not alone and that others are there for you can provide much-needed comfort. Taking care of yourself emotionally will allow you to find the strength to continue your journey as a caregiver.

Examples of ways a caregiver can improve their emotional health:

- Caregiver support groups are a wonderful way to connect with others who are on a similar journey.
- Social support is critical to emotional health. Set aside time on a regular basis to meet a friend for coffee, or have a friend come visit, if even for a short time.
- Practice self care. Caregivers should consider taking themselves to a movie or dinner. Although time is often limited, it is important for them to set aside moments for their own needs so they can continue providing effective care for the care recipient. Local Area Agencies on Aging may also be able to offer resources for respite care.

Challenges Facing Mental Health Caregivers

- Loneliness, isolation, and limited social support
- Health issues related to chronic caregiving stress
- Navigating complex care systems
- Delays in accurate diagnosis for the care recipient
- Medication management
- Planning for the future
- Need for caregiver training and education

Caregivers often feel pressure to stay positive or hide difficult news, which can create a disconnect between what they say and what they truly feel. When a loved one's recovery takes an unexpected turn, it is natural to experience a range of emotions, including sadness, frustration, or uncertainty. Pausing to acknowledge these feelings can help caregivers understand what they need and how to move forward. Leaning on trusted friends, family, or support groups can also provide meaningful comfort during challenging times. As a caregiver looking for services, there are mental health advocacy organizations such as the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) and Mental Health America (MHA) that can help the caregiver with the first steps. Access to services can make the difference between a trajectory that is less challenging and one that is not. Caregivers report that they rely on healthcare providers and/or Internet searches to find services and programs. When it comes to the economic impacts of caregiving, the barriers can be challenging: addressing these barriers requires specific knowledge. Not understanding these economic impacts can be a roadblock to services and guidance.

Organizations with Resources for Caregivers

AARP–Caregiving
Caregiver Action Network
Family Caregiver Alliance
MentalHealth.Gov
National Alliance for Caregiving
National Alliance on Mental Illness
U.S. Department of Health and Human Service

Sources: Mental Health America NAMI National Alliance for Caregiving