



Chronic Stress Impacts Family Care Givers

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I recently had an article published in the Notary Society of BC's spring edition of Scrivener Magazine, 2015, Volume 24(1).

The caregiving role may be a short stint or long term, but it often plays a role in stress and chronic stress.

- Approximately 350,000 people (7.5% of the population) in BC are between the ages of 75 and 90.
- Currently, 70,000 people in BC are living with Alzheimer's or some other form of dementia and the numbers continue to grow.

People are living longer. More and more family members are being called to provide care and support for a relative in the home. For caregivers, stressors are always present; you constantly feel pressure or under attack. Whether the stress is emotional, physical, or financial, the fight-or-flight reaction remains ON. That creates an overexposure to cortisol and other stress hormones that can disrupt almost all your body's processes. Caregivers often forget about their own self-care. Even when they feel stress, they ignore the symptoms. Physical and mental health issues that might arise include emotional distress that leads to depression and anxiety; digestive problems; high blood pressure; heart disease; sleep problems; weight gain; suppression of the immune system; memory loss; and an inability to concentrate.

Chronic stress is the response to prolonged emotional pressure and unrelenting demands that create feelings of being overwhelmed, rundown, or worried. That can result in health consequences, putting caregivers at risk of developing physical and mental health problems. The problem is you can unwittingly adapt to a higher level of stress that begins to feel normal. Chronic stress can follow you even when you have left the stressful situation. It takes a conscious effort to become aware of your level of stress and change your lifestyle accordingly. You may need help with stress management and to learn how to care for yourself properly again. Talk to your doctor about your concerns.

Most important on your caregiving journey, remember to eat properly, allow yourself a full night's sleep, and exercise regularly. It's important that you take care of yourself and stay healthy so you can take care of others. Here are some things you can do to help support yourself while caring for a loved one:

- Join a caregiver support group.
- Arrange to take an extended break or a mini-break. If your parent or spouse lives at home, encourage them to take a respite holiday at a seniors home, to give both of you a break from each other.
- Ask a family member to help in areas where they would be most comfortable.
- Set up a buddy/communication system for sharing the duties with family or friends.
- Take long walks.
- Check with your church to see if someone will volunteer to visit once a week.
- Consider hiring a companion to take over your duties 1 or 2 days a week.

References:

BC Government Statistics, American Psychological Association, Alzheimer's Society of BC

....with care, integrity and heart in mind for you.

Barb