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A Growing Nation of Caregivers

Family Caregiving Provides Support for Older Adults

Lois speaks warmly now about her relationship with her husband, who suffers from multiple sclerosis. She has been his primary caretaker in their Arizona home for years now. But there was a time where their relationship was not as strong. In fact, before his condition was diagnosed, his behavior was so unbearable that at the urging of her children, Lois was even considering divorce.

The sicker he became, the more he tried to hide the symptoms, and the more difficult he was to live with. "As a family, we tried to act normal," she recalls, "as the fabrics of our lives were totally unraveling." What finally set the wheels in motion was when her husband had a seizure and was hospitalized. Lois made the decision to stay with him and care for him. "I knew," she explains, "there was still a person I loved inside there." Later, when he was diagnosed and confined to a wheelchair, he started acting more like his old self.

He has been a full quadriplegic for eight to ten years, she explains. "I think I've stopped counting, to protect myself." She feeds him, dresses him, and performs many of the caregiving activities required by his illness. Lois' journey from exasperated spouse to loving caretaker has not been easy, yet she is philosophical about it. In the years since his diagnosis, she has learned a great deal about the illness, as well as the many facets of caregiving.

Gauging a National Trend

In fact, Lois' role as caregiver is becoming increasingly common. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Aging, families—not social service agencies, nursing homes, or government programs—are the mainstay of long-term care for older persons in the United States.

More than 22.4 million U.S. households are serving in family caregiving roles for persons over the age of 50, and that number will increase rapidly as the population ages and as medical science continues to extend life. In fact, the contribution of America's caregivers to our health care system is valued at \$257 billion annually. And the National Alliance for Caregiving estimates that by 2007, the total number of active caregivers in the United States could increase to nearly 15.6 million working Americans, roughly one in ten employed workers.

Caregiving can take many forms. While some caregivers provide full-time care, many others perform a few specific caregiving tasks for a senior, such as providing transportation or performing some household duties. Caregivers may provide assistance to family members or friends who experience limitations in activities of daily living (ADLs), such as bathing, dressing, eating, and toileting. And as the needs of the person requiring assistance change over time, so may the demands on the caregiver.

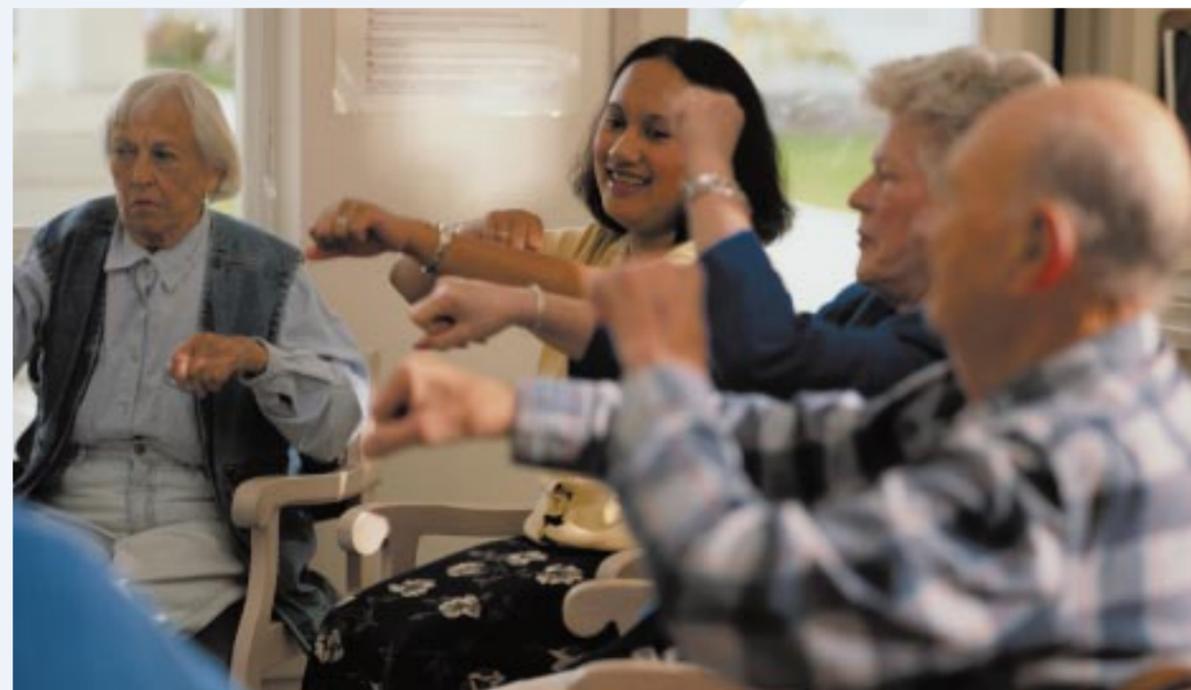
But help is available. For example, adult day care centers offer care and companionship for older persons who need assistance or supervision during the day. Such programs offer relief to family members or caregivers and allow them the freedom to go to work, handle personal business, or just relax while knowing their loved one is well cared for and safe. Approximately 150,000 older Americans use the more than 3,500 adult care programs, according to the National Adult Day Services Association.

Additionally, through the Older Americans Act, administered by the Administration on Aging (AoA), services such as transportation, case management, information and referral, home health assistance, legal and financial assistance, meal preparation and disease prevention are available to help older people and their caregivers. Through these programs, over seven million older Americans are assisted in daily lives.

Caregiving and its effect on the caregiver

As if the act of caregiving wasn't enough of a challenge, recent research suggests that the combination of loss, prolonged distress, and the physical demands of caregiving hurts the health of caregivers. As a result, they are more vulnerable to infectious diseases such as colds and flu, and chronic diseases such as heart disease, diabetes, and cancer. What's more, elderly caregivers who are experiencing stress related to caregiving (and may themselves have a history of chronic illness) have a 63% higher mortality rate. And caregivers are twice as likely to experience depressive symptoms as the general population.

Researchers have also found that caregivers are less likely to engage in health-promoting behaviors than others their same age. Reasons for this are many—and range from the sense of guilt a caregiver may feel when spending time to take care of themselves, to simply not having enough time in the day, to not having access to the information they need. But the bottom line effect is the same: they often don't do the "little things" for themselves that are so important for chronic disease prevention and control. Lois agrees, and notes that before she learned how to cope with her role as her husband's caregiver, "I blew out my immune system, and came down with all kinds of allergies."



Resources for Caregivers

To address the unique needs of caregivers, the National Family Caregiver Support Program was enacted in 2000 as a part of the Older Americans Act. This program provides funding to the National Aging Services Network of federal, state, and local agencies for informational services, assistance in obtaining services, counseling and training, respite care, and supplemental services.

Caregivers need to care for their own health so that they can be better prepared to assist their loved one. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Aging recommends the following tips:

- Get as much information as you can about your loved one's illnesses and identify services available in the community. Information helps you to make informed decisions. Don't wait until there is a crisis to begin to look.
- Remember to get immunized and obtain routine preventive screenings.
- Take some time each day to do something for yourself.
- Don't try to do it all yourself. A physician recently informed me that he wrote prescriptions for respite care for caregivers in his practice that they could give to a relative. He says it works!
- Don't skip meals and make sure that your diet is balanced.
- Set aside some time each day for physical activity.
- Make sure you understand your medications and take them properly.
- If you suspect that you are depressed or anxious, discuss this with your physician.

As the nation celebrates Older Americans Month this May, you can learn more about these and other programs by visiting www.aoa.gov. This year's theme—"Aging Well, Living Well"—highlights the many ways Americans are getting more enjoyment from their lives as they age. For information about what resources are available locally, contact the Eldercare Locator at 1-800-677-1116 or visit www.eldercare.gov.

