



## Caring for a Family Member During Stressful Times: Considerations for Maintaining Mental Health

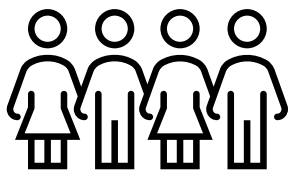
*Sarah Hodgskiss, Ty Aller, and Elizabeth Fauth*

Caring for a family member can take many forms. Whether you are caring for your mother with dementia or your son with a disability, caregiving for a family member can be very rewarding yet very stressful. As a family caregiver, it is likely that your stress has increased even more due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Now more than ever, you might find it helpful to “care for the caregiver.” The following will help you identify your own stress, explore strategies to manage this stress, and then use additional resources for further support and assistance.

### Identifying Stress

Stress is a normal part of life and is experienced by everyone. However, if you

are experiencing chronic stress, other areas of your life, including your physical and mental health, will be affected (Schulz & Sherwood, 2017). Chronic stress occurs when exposure to stress is continual, repeated over an extended period of time rather than stress stemming from a single event (such as having a bad day or being stuck in traffic). Family caregivers are likely to experience chronic stress due to the nature and duration of the responsibilities. It is not uncommon for caregivers to spend less time on self-care and their own needs in an effort to put their energy toward their family member. However, if you are aware that you are experiencing chronic stress,



# 53 Million

Americans served as a family caregiver in the past year  
(National Alliance for Caregiving, 2020).

then you can begin to manage it in a healthy and positive way.

Table 1 provides some examples of what chronic stress may look like. **Do you feel like you can relate to these experiences? Do you experience these symptoms not just for a day but for a pattern of days?** If you notice that you might be experiencing chronic stress, it is important to explore ways to manage this stress so you can

improve your mental health and continue effectively in your caregiving role.

While caregiving can lead to chronic stress, it is also important to remember that there are benefits of caregiving for a family member as well. These benefits include feeling needed, learning new skills, and building a stronger relationship with your family member (Carbonneau et al., 2010).

**Table 1**  
***Identifying Chronic Stress***

Symptom	Example
Irritability	Do you find yourself getting easily bothered by things that did not used to annoy you?
Feeling overwhelmed	Are you finding it harder to manage your work, caregiving role, and other responsibilities while also taking care of yourself?
Difficulty relaxing	Do you have a hard time quieting your mind because you are thinking of all the things that need to be done? Does this keep you up at night and make it difficult to get restful sleep?
Changes in appetite	Do you find yourself forgetting to eat during the day or do you eat more than usual throughout the day?
Lack of focus	Have you had a harder time focusing on tasks while you are doing them and noticed your mind wandering?

## Managing Your Stress

Although caring for a family member involves many things you cannot control, this does not mean you feel stressed all the time. Even for people in stressful roles, there are activities and techniques you can do to feel better. See Figure 1 for strategies that can help people feel better with their stress and prevent stress from causing problems in their own health. For example, steps such as eating healthy and exercising can reduce the effects of stress on your health (Papathanasiou et al., 2015). Try to incorporate one or more of these ideas into your daily life in small but significant ways,

and be consistent—even a few minutes a day can make a difference. In addition to taking steps at home to manage stress, locating resources that can be of assistance is also beneficial.

## Resources

While the ideas in Figure 1 identify some useful and quick ways to help manage stress, other resources are available to provide support and assistance. Educating yourself about caregiving and learning certain techniques for managing stress can be helpful for many. Below you will find a few resources that provide further support and information to caregivers. Contact your



**Figure 1.** *Stress Management Solutions*

local Extension office or visit their website for additional resources available in your community.

## **National Resources for Family Caregivers**

### *The National Alliance for Caregiving (NAC)*

The NAC collaborates with other caregiving organizations to provide resources that provide support and information to caregivers. Their website lists key resources and an explanation of the services that they provide. Find more information at <https://www.caregiving.org/resources/gene-ral-caregiving/> or visit their website at [www.caregiving.org](http://www.caregiving.org).

### *Administration for Community Living (ACL)*

As part of the United States Department of Health and Human Services, the ACL is another organization that provides many resources. Their website includes links to caregiver support programs, respite care programs, and other services available for caregivers that can assist in managing stress levels. Caregiver support groups can provide caregivers with a community of others having similar experiences. They may help caregivers feel empowered and provide insights into others' experiences, and can even help improve caregiving skills. Visit their website at [www.acl.gov](http://www.acl.gov) or follow this link that will take you directly to their caregiver resources page: <https://acl.gov/programs/support-caregivers>.

## **References**

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