

Controlling Stress

Caring for an aging relative is a difficult job, and at times it can be extremely stressful. You may have gone into the situation thinking that since you love this person, you would be able to handle any stress that would result from caring for them. It is likely, however, that you are finding yourself overworked, overwhelmed and stressed out.

Recognizing the symptoms of stress and working to prevent or treat them can make you a more effective caregiver—and also give you some sense of your life and yourself back. Caregivers tend not to take care of themselves as well as they take care of everyone else. This self-neglect only compounds the stress that you feel, leading to a vicious circle of guilt, self-punishment and further self-neglect. Take the time to see the ways that you are stressed, and to manage this stress so that it does not destroy your life.



Stress Warning Signs

If you are experiencing even a few of these warning signs, you may be suffering from stress:

- Loss of energy
- Feeling out of control
- Exhibiting uncharacteristic emotions and actions
- Loss of interest in people and activities you once found pleasurable
- Isolation
- Overuse of alcohol, sleeping pills, caffeine, or cigarettes
- Increased health problems
- Difficulty sleeping
- Change in appetite
- Loss of memory
- Lack of concentration
- Irritability or impatience
- Suicidal thoughts
- Anxiety/panic attacks

Managing Stress

Stress is a natural response to difficult circumstances, and it can be managed by a combination of changing the circumstances and changing your responses to the circumstances. Here are some tips to help you get a handle on the stress in your life:

- ✓ **Set limits for yourself:** Don't be ashamed of the fact that you can't do everything; no one can. Realistically examine your skills, abilities and desires. What do you want to do? What don't you want to do? What are you able to do? What aren't you able to do it?
- ✓ **Have realistic expectations:** This goes for your expectations both of yourself and of others.
- ✓ **Set realistic goals:** Don't think too big. Decide what you'd like to see happen in the future, both in your

life and the life of your aging relative. Focus on simple things—small happinesses and triumphs.

- ✓ **Ask for help and accept it:** Involve as many people as you can in the caregiving—family members, professionals, community services and friends. Don't think that you can do everything by yourself; you can't. Others will be more than willing to lend a hand if you ask them, and if you are willing to accept the help they can give.
- ✓ **Take care of yourself:** Don't fall into the caregiver trap of neglecting yourself to take care of others. You and your needs and desires are important; take care of yourself first, and then you can take care of others.