

Caring for the Caregiver

Caregiving is a big job and very stressful. First we will talk about stress, what it is and how to recognize it. As the week progresses we will look at how to cope with stress and provide you with some tools to take care of yourself. A cancer diagnosis affects the whole family even though most of the focus is on the patient him or herself. Caregivers face multiple stressors, not only the cancer, although that would be enough in and of itself. Many caregivers have their own health related concerns, they may be caring for children, grandchildren and/or aging parents, they may be working. Roles change as one person deals with being a cancer survivor and undergoing treatment and withstanding the effects of the illness itself. The caregiver has more demands than ever before.

Stress is any change to which you must adapt, even a good change represents stress, for example, the birth of a child or getting married. The way that you respond to stressful experiences determines the impact that stress will have on your life. Stress is experienced from four basic sources: 1.) The environment - traffic, weather, noise, etc. 2.) Social stressors - job interview, financial problems, loss, demands for your time and attention, etc. 3.) Physiological stressors - illness 4.) Thoughts.

Burnout is a chronic state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion. The ability to cope with day to day stressors is severely impaired. Everyone gets tired, uptight and we all have days when we just can't think straight. Burnout occurs when there are too many pressures, conflicts and demands and too few emotional rewards.

Physical and psychological resources are depleted by the constant demand for a person's energy, expertise, and compassion. Stress impacts us at work, at home, and socially. We all have pressures and stresses. We're going to explore some ways to better manage those pressures and stresses to prevent them from growing out of control, to prevent you from reaching burnout.

When we achieve burnout we are exhausted physically, emotionally and mentally. Physical signs of exhaustion include chronic fatigue, low energy, difficulty falling asleep or waking up, being accident prone, increased susceptibility to illness (colds, flu), headaches, muscle tension and back pain.

Emotional signs of exhaustion include inaccurately perceiving daily situations and therefore, responding inappropriately, your ability to cope breaks down. You may feel apathetic, helpless, anxious, worried, apprehensive, and nervous.

Mental signs of exhaustion include short attention span, decreased ability to concentrate, problem solving skills suffer, creativity declines, coping may revert to rigid and inflexible adherence to rules, negativity toward others, lowered self esteem.

These signs are also signs of grief, remember, stress is change and change is loss. Stages of grief include shock and denial, depression, anger, guilt and blame and understanding. Grief is not a linear process, so you may feel these emotions multiple times, and in no set order. Grief is stressful, especially when you try to suppress your emotions or do not accept and understand your emotions. As an example, it is very common for caregivers to express that they wish the person diagnosed with the cancer would just die, that it would just end. These are normal feelings, but produce feelings of guilt in the caregiver.

You may feel like you shouldn't feel/think this way and believe that you are the only one who does. You are not alone. Stresses, like losses build on each other. Can you see from reviewing these signs, how stress impacts you and those close to you?

Lisa O'Brien, LCSW
Clinic Cancer Care
Great Falls, MT