



Support Group Helps Alzheimer's Caregivers Avoid Burnout

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ALTON, IL -- Caring for a loved one with Alzheimer's disease presents many challenges. But the caregiver must also provide another special type of care – self-care.

A recent survey reported by the National Family Caregivers Association notes that the average age of a patient with Alzheimer's disease is 82, with 86 percent of patients 75 or older. That means many caregivers are also older, and at least 24 percent are retired.

Older adults caring for a loved one with Alzheimer's face many stressors and risk caregiver burnout. When asked to report how the caregiver felt about their situation, "accepting" was the most frequently reported word. However, female caregivers were more likely than their male counterparts to also use the words "drained" or "exhausted." Men were more likely to use the words "frustrated" or "impatient."

The Center for Senior Renewal at Alton Memorial Hospital is holding a support group for Alzheimer's caregivers at 2 p.m. on the second Friday of every month beginning in March. Senior Renewal also provides group and individual therapy, and psychiatric management for older adults. There are other services in your community, including adult day services, respite care, skilled nursing, legal advice, financial support and homemaker services. You can contact your local Area Agency on Aging to find out more.

Caregiver burnout can be prevented. As the stress of caregiving goes up, the caregiver can take some practical steps to avoid these risks. First, learn as much as you can about the disease. There are resources online, booklets from the National Institute on Health

and support groups that can give you up-to-date information on Alzheimer's disease and how you can help yourself and your loved one. Remember, knowledge equips you to make better choices for you and your loved one.

Second, know your own limits. It's important to be realistic about what you can and cannot do. Clear communication with physicians and others involved regarding what you cannot do alone is essential. Set limits and stick to them. If you get sick or "burned out," you cannot help your loved one or anyone else. This isn't a sprint, it's a marathon.

Next, it's important to accept your feelings without self-recrimination. Caregiving can be rewarding, but you may also feel angry, guilty, hopeless, helpless, sad and a sense of grief. As long as you do not compromise the well-being of your care receiver, allow yourself to feel what you feel.

Finally, confide in others. Talk with other caregivers and people you trust. Daytime and evening caregiver support groups are available at Alton Memorial Hospital for family caregivers of a loved one with Alzheimer's disease and other dementias. You may also benefit from seeing a counselor or therapist.

Caregiving is an act of kindness, loyalty and ultimately love. Take the necessary steps of caring well for yourself so that you may continue to care for your loved one with Alzheimer's disease.

Amy Eilers, LCSW, is the program director for the Center for Senior Renewal and the Memory Disorder Diagnostic Clinic at Alton Memorial Hospital. For more information about caregiver support groups, call 618-433-6016.

Common warning signs of caregiver burnout

- You have much less energy than you used to
- It seems like you catch every cold or flu going around
- You're constantly exhausted, even after sleeping or taking a break
- You neglect your own needs, either because you're too busy or you don't care anymore
- Your life revolves around caregiving, but it gives you little or no satisfaction
- You have trouble sleeping, even when help is available
- You're increasingly impatient and irritable with the loved one
- You feel overwhelmed, helpless and hopeless

Tips for family caregivers

- Caregiving is work. Reward yourself with respite breaks often.

- Watch out for signs of depression; don't postpone getting professional help when needed.
- When people offer to help, accept the offer and suggest specific things they can do.
- Educate yourself about the disease and learn how to communicate effectively with physicians.
- Be open to change. You may have made promises in the past you cannot keep now. Explore your options for services your loved one may need as the disease progresses.
- Be kind to your body. Be good to your back. Eat healthy meals. Get rest.
- Grieve your losses. This process involves many different kinds of losses as time goes on.