

News Release

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Caregivers watch for warning signs of distress or depression

If you are a caregiver for a family member or friend, your feelings of sadness, loneliness or anger may be a warning sign of distress. It is not unusual for caregivers to develop distress or even depression as a result of the constant demands they face in providing care, according to the Family Caregiver Alliance.

Caregivers may sacrifice their own physical and emotional needs as they work to provide the best care for a loved one. This can create strain and feelings of anger, anxiety, sadness, isolation, exhaustion, and even guilt for having these feelings.

Everyone has negative feelings that come and go over time, but when these feelings become more intense and leave caregivers feeling drained of energy, crying frequently or easily angered, it may be a warning sign of distress or depression. Although some may see distress or depression as a sign of weakness, it really is a sign that something is out of balance. Recognizing that you are out of balance is a strength. Ignoring or denying your feelings will not make them go away.

If you feel you are out of balance, you can help yourself through exercise, a healthy diet, and positive support from family and friends. Discussions with a health or mental health professional may help prevent more serious symptoms of distress and depression over time.

Distress is different for everyone, ranging from a general sadness that lasts for months to a more sudden and intense negative change in outlook. Often feelings of distress are ones we feel off and on and aren't much of a concern. It is when you have several of these feelings and they last for longer than two weeks that you should consider reaching out for help. Some common feelings associated with distress or depression include:

- A change in eating habits with unwanted weight gain or loss.
- A change in sleep patterns - too much or not enough.
- Feeling tired all the time.
- A loss of interest in people and activities that once brought you pleasure.
- Becoming easily agitated or angered.
- Feeling that nothing you do is good enough.
- Thoughts of death or suicide, or attempting suicide.
- Ongoing physical symptoms that do not respond to treatment, such as headaches, digestive disorders and chronic pain.

Some caregivers are at increased risk for distress or depression. Research has found that a person who provides care for someone with dementia is twice as likely to suffer from depression as someone providing care for a person without dementia. Not only do these caregivers spend significantly more hours per week providing care, they report more employment problems, personal stress, mental and physical health problems, less time to do the things they enjoy, less time with family, and more family conflict than other caregivers. Dementia-related symptoms make this work challenging every day, with fewer opportunities to get rest or assistance.

It is critical for caregivers to receive consistent and dependable support, especially those working in this situation.

What should you do if you think you are under distress or may be depressed?

Recognizing that you may be depressed is the first step. Depression deserves to be treated with the same attention you would give another illness, such as diabetes or high blood pressure. If you are uncomfortable using the term depression, tell your doctor that you are "distressed", "feeling down" or "feeling blue." The important thing is to seek help.

The second step toward dealing with these feelings and emotions is to meet with a mental health professional such as a psychologist, psychiatrist or social worker. Ask a friend for the name of a professional they know and trust, or ask your minister, rabbi, doctor or health insurance provider for a referral. It is important to feel comfortable with the professional you see.

The guidance of a mental health professional is strongly recommended. A therapist or counselor will listen to your concerns and set up a course of treatment that works for you. The time you spend with a mental health professional is 'your' time and will help you be a better caregiver, as you'll be managing the ups and downs of caregiving better.

In addition to seeking assistance from a mental health professional, there are a number of strategies you can use to help yourself. The National Institute of Mental Health provides the following suggestions on helping yourself with distress or depression:

- Set realist goals and assume a reasonable amount of responsibility.
- Break large tasks into smaller ones, set priorities, and do what you can as you can.
- Try to be with other people and confide in someone; it is better than being alone and secretive.
- Participate in activities that may make you feel better, such as mild exercise, going to a movie or ball game, or attending a religious, social or community event.
- Expect your mood to improve gradually, not immediately. Feeling better takes time.
- Postpone important decisions until the depression has lifted. Discuss significant decisions with others who know you well and have a more objective view of your situation.
- People rarely "snap out of" a depression. But you can feel a little better day-by-day.
- Positive thinking will replace the negative thinking that is part of the depression. Negative thinking will be reduced as the depression responds to treatment.

- Let your family and friends help you.

Research also shows that caregivers who seek assistance, such as letting others care for their loved one, along with positive feedback from others, positive self-talk and recreational activities, experience lower levels of depression. There are classes and support groups available through caregiver support organizations to help you learn or practice effective coping strategies. For your health and the health of those around you, take some time to care for yourself.

For more information about caregiving issues, visit these Web sites of interest:

- The Wisconsin Alliance for Family Caregiving Alliance Web site includes resources and locations of caregiving classes: <http://www.uwex.edu/ces/flp/caregiving/>
- The Family Caregiver Alliance Web site has resources, online support and fact sheets for caregivers: www.caregiver.org
- The National Mental Health Association Web site features a depression-screening checklist: <http://depression-screening.org>
- The American Geriatrics Association Web site focuses on caring for someone with Alzheimer's disease: <http://www.americangeriatrics.org/education/forum/alzcare.shtml>
- The National Institute of Mental Health Web site features signs and symptoms of depression and resources for getting help in your area, plus a special section on men and depression: <http://www.nimh.nih.gov>

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