

Caregivers: coping with stress

Stress occurs when one is faced with overwhelming interruptions and surprises in the daily routine. If you are a caregiver of an individual with schizophrenia, each day brings new challenges that may interfere with your life.

Symptoms of schizophrenia can be challenging for family members to deal with, especially at the onset of the disease.

Caring for someone who has been diagnosed with schizophrenia can be overwhelming, exhausting and difficult. Caregivers may feel alone and in denial about believing that their loved one is schizophrenic. About half of the people with schizophrenia do not recognize that they have a problem, or that they are sick. Typically, those who do not believe they are schizophrenic will not seek treatment. This can be a very stressful time for a caregiver.¹

As a caregiver it is important to manage stress appropriately. While it is sometimes impossible to avoid the stressors (the events that occur before stress is experienced), there are some steps you may take to better cope with your situation and perhaps avoid future episodes of stress. The list below includes some suggestions.

1. Create your own support system. Seek out friends and family members who can step in when you feel tired and overwhelmed, or when you want some time to yourself. When people

offer to help, accept their offers. Psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers and other counselors may help you find support groups and community services for extra support. (For reputable support organizations, see the schizophrenia caregivers' Resource Sheet.)

- 2. Create a crisis plan.** It's a good idea to create a crisis plan and put it where you can easily retrieve it. In this way, if a crisis is brewing, you will be well prepared. You might also consider giving a copy to a trusted friend or family member.
- 3. Arm yourself with information.** Knowledge about schizophrenia and its treatment helps you assist your loved one in making informed health care decisions. You might share this information with friends so that they may understand the illness better.
- 4. Exercise.** Exercise may help to improve your mood and reduce irritability; it also may help you sleep better. Even walking up the steps, rather than taking the elevator, can be beneficial.



5. Eat a healthy diet. Certain nutrients give you more energy, ease digestive problems, help you lose extra pounds and help your immune system work well. Eat a balanced diet with food from all the major food groups.

6. Limit or avoid alcohol and drugs. Alcohol and drug use appears to help one cope at first, but continued alcohol and drug use may eventually result in additional problems. If you are taking medication, combining it with alcohol can be dangerous. Speak with your doctor about the use of alcohol with any medication you are taking. Also ask your doctor for help if you are using alcohol or drugs and cannot stop by yourself.

7. Stay connected. It is important that you interact with people even when you don't feel like it, so you do not become isolated. If you can't bring yourself to be with people, stay connected to your environment in other ways: go to the library, to the movies, or walk around a shopping center.

Spot clues that your health is being impacted

Because caregivers are consumed with providing support to their ill loved one(s), they may forget to take care of themselves. This can lead to both emotional and physical health problems.²

The following list includes health issues that caregivers may experience. Do you find that you experience any of these problems on a regular basis?³

- Have decision making difficulties
- Experience loneliness
- Feel irritable

- Have crying spells
- Have back pain
- Have sleep problems
- Have other aches and pains (e.g., headaches, stomachaches, colds)
- Feel strained between work and family responsibilities
- Feel loss of privacy and personal time
- Feel upset that your loved one has changed as a result of the illness
- Feel like your loved one cannot be safely left alone
- Feel completely overwhelmed.

If you have experienced or are experiencing any of these feelings or behaviors, and feel that they are negatively impacting your quality of life, consider scheduling an appointment with your health care provider.

When you meet with your provider, report and discuss all of the following:

- How long you have been experiencing health problems and the degree to which they interfere with your daily activities
- How long the health problems have been problems for you
- The extent to which you have control over the problems (For example. are you able to predict them? Are you able to manage them?)
- Your family's history of similar health issues
- Recent changes in your life (good and bad), such as job change, new baby, deaths in the family, divorce, etc.

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- All medications you are using, including prescription medications, over-the-counter medications, vitamins, supplements, caffeine and alcohol.

Your provider will conduct physical and emotional evaluations. Your provider may refer you to other practitioners in order to further explore your symptoms. Health practitioners involved in your care will then partner with you to create a personalized treatment plan to address your symptoms and concerns. Through the help and support of health care practitioners, you can learn to successfully manage your stress.

Learn more about schizophrenia

- **National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI)** www.nami.org
- **National Institute of Mental Health** www.nimh.nih.gov

1. *Harris Interactive. Schizophrenia: Public Attitudes, Personal Needs--Research and Data Findings. Conducted for the National Alliance on Mental Illness. April 25, 2010.*
2. *Caqueo-Urizar A, Gutierrez-Maldonado J, Miranda-Castillo C. Quality of life in caregivers of patients with schizophrenia: a literature review. Medscape Health and Quality of Life Outcomes. 10/22/09. <http://www.medscape.com/viewarticle/710425>. p.3.*
3. *American Medical Association. Caregiver Health and Caregiver Self-Assessment Tool. Retrieval date: 2/24/10. <http://www.amaassn.org/ama/pub/physician-resources/public-health/promoting-healthy-lifestyles/geriatric-health/caregiver-health.shtml>.*

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