

Caring For A Loved One With Mental Illness Starts By Caring For Yourself

(NAPSA)—Roughly 40 million Americans are family caregivers. As the nation's population ages, that number is expected to increase, according to AARP. That's one reason health experts have an important message for caregivers: To properly care for your loved one, you must first take care of yourself.

One Woman's Story

Like many caregivers, "Ellen" (not her real name) is so focused on her husband's needs and managing their household that her own wellness is often neglected.

"Some days can be very long and difficult," she explains. For the past six years, she's been a caregiver for her husband, "Dan," who was diagnosed with a mental illness. Dan's anxiety and depression can be paralyzing and he gets scared, agitated and nervous when Ellen isn't by his side.

In addition to the emotional stress she feels from her 24/7 role of caring for Dan's physical and mental needs, Ellen, who is in her late 50s, also worries about finances. "I wonder how I'll find a job that will pay the bills and still allow me to be available to my husband." In the same breath, despite the obvious challenges she faces, Ellen speaks to the rewards of being a caregiver. "I believe it's made our marriage stronger in many ways. We cut out the silly little things couples fight about and focus on the important aspects of life."

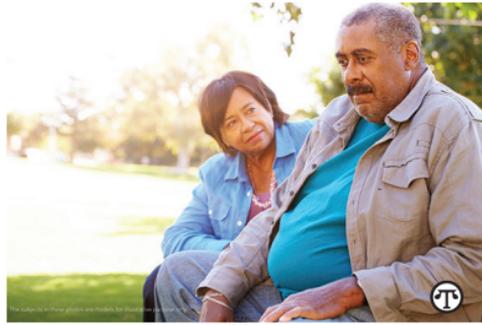
What The Science Says

Researchers have closely studied the effects of caregiving on health and well-being. The Family Caregiver Alliance says caregivers are less likely to practice preventive health care and self-care behaviors than noncaregivers. They frequently suffer from sleep deprivation, poor eating habits and lack of physical exercise. They're at increased risk of an excessive use of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs, as well as having a chronic illness, including high cholesterol and blood pressure. Studies also show an estimated 46 to 59 percent of caregivers become clinically depressed.

Make Yourself a Priority

To help, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) offers free online wellness resources so caregivers can manage stress and stay healthy. These recommendations for the mind, body and spirit include:

- **Follow a healthy lifestyle.** Start with the basics. Eat healthful foods and limit alcohol intake. Don't smoke or use addictive substances. Exercise regularly. Consistently practice good sleep habits. Make time for rest and relaxation.



Ellen and Dan are finding ways to cope with his mental illness without risking her health.

- **Make wellness part of everyday life.** Online resources, such as the Eight Dimensions of Wellness, provide practical ways to develop healthy habits that can have a positive effect on your mental and physical health. SAMHSA's wellness strategies address emotional and general health, which are both needed to improve personal resilience and manage stress.
- **Connect with friends and family.** Relationships and social networks that provide support, friendship, love and hope are essential to well-being.
- **Schedule regular checkups and health screenings.** Act on results of checkups and health screenings, such as maintaining a healthy weight and blood pressure. Primary care physicians can recommend medications or treatments to help manage stress.
- **Find a support group or mental health professional.** Family doctors may be able to recommend a counselor or therapist. SAMHSA can also identify mental health professionals by zip code through its Behavioral Health Treatment Services Locator: www.findtreatment.samhsa.gov.

As for Ellen, she's been taking steps to make her mental and physical health a priority. During times when she feels overwhelmed, Ellen has actively started to add in her own stress relievers. "I read a book, walk around the block or sit with our cats. Sometimes I'll call a friend to come over and sit with Dan, so I can take a break or run a quick errand."

She recently signed up for a 12-week course for caregivers, something a friend offered to attend with her. It helps her feel less stressed and boosts her well-being.

Providing care for loved ones is an act of great generosity and it can be rewarding. However, it can also be stressful and may occupy a great deal of time. It's critical for caregivers to balance their own needs with what they provide to others. Not only will they feel better, they'll be better able to help. The key is learning to incorporate wellness into everyday life.