

Recognizing Caregiver Burnout

With a shortage of quality caregivers nationwide, we are seeing a higher rate of caregiver burnout. Caregiver burnout is when a caregiver has little chance of relief in their positions – a day off, sick time, vacation time or holiday off has not been had - even just a few hours here or there as needed is impossible to find and so they reach a point where they burn out. Burn out can lead to illness, emotional drain, depression and more.

There may be many reasons why a caregiver might not be able to find relief: no others are caring for the person requiring services, the person requiring services lost a worker and has not been able to find a replacement, there is not enough money to provide extra help for the person requiring services. It could be that the caregiver really needs the hours (the paycheck) and so they are working as much as possible and some caregivers have multiple jobs. In the “baby boomer” generation, many are now caring for aging loved ones while holding down a full time position and caring for their own family at the same time, so that trying to get a break is a very difficult thing to do.

Whatever the reason, caregiver burnout is real and increasingly the reason caregivers are feeling the *stressors* in life, giving more and are not being able to provide for others the way they want to because they are stretched too thin.

Caring for others is not always just a physical job, it can often times be an emotional job. Let’s face it, most people in the caregiving business do it for that reason – because they are caring individuals and so caring for others comes naturally for them. Asking a caregiver to not develop or to put on hold emotional ties when caring for another’s needs is almost an impossible request. They help others because they care - and because they are such giving people, *they put their own needs on hold*.

When a person loses sight of their own well-being, it is easy for life to spiral out of control. So how do you recognize when a caregiver is heading towards burnout?

There are many forms of caregiver burnout and each is unique to the person affected. Many times, the caregiver keeps on going, not recognizing or ignoring that they are overwhelmed and burning out. It is important that the person receiving care or others close to them are able to identify warning signs of burnout if the caregiver does not and intervene in a positive manner. Caring about the caregiver is an important role and we can play a part in assuring our caregivers stay healthy and well and that they know they are appreciated.

Some of the more common signs that a caregiver is burning out are mood swings that can be severe, anger, frustration or lack of patience. A caregiver can stop being personable, turn inwards and uncommunicative, or they can become mean and angry at things that never bothered them before. They can lash out at those who are closest to them. They can appear irritable. They can suffer from sleeplessness, anxiety, or are fatigued or easily exhausted. Depression, self-neglect, and isolation can be signs that burnout is severe.

People suffering from burnout can turn to bad habits as a coping mechanism and bad habits can quickly become dangerous for their health and well-being: poor food choices, excessive alcohol, medications such as sleeping pills, pain pills, or illegal drugs can be the (wrong) release they are searching for but unable to find.

If you are receiving services from a caregiver, pay attention for signs that they might be overdoing and heading towards burnout. The ability to avoid caregiver burnout is crucial to you both. Finding your caregiver a backup person to give them some time off here and there is in everyone’s best interest. Watch for changes in their health, their mood and behavior. If you think your caregiver might be burning out, have a conversation with them and let them know that you are concerned – and don’t let them brush it off as nothing – remember, *the caregiver is often the last to admit they need a break*. They will keep on going because that is what they do – put everyone else’s needs before their own. Prevention

of burnout is the goal and that can't be reached without everyone agreeing on a plan of action to get the caregiver what they need.

If you are a caregiver, there are positive ways to cope with caregiver burnout. Recognition is key and taking steps to care for oneself in a healthy manner can prevent/relieve most burnout. Understanding one's own limits and realizing that you cannot do everything all the time is a good start to taking the necessary steps to care for yourself. Asking others for help so that you can get the breaks you need should be the main focus, but many times asking for help is a difficult thing to do. Don't let pride stand in the way of asking for help – if you can't care for yourself (as a caregiver), and you are overdoing without the necessary breaks needed, you soon won't be able to care for others. If there is no help that you can find, look further – ask other family members, friends, neighbors, community members, religious organizations, companies that offer respite services, caregivers associations and more. Tell everyone you know that you are reaching your limit and you need help – no one will hear you if you don't speak up. Know that *giving others the opportunity to help you is just as rewarding to them* as the reward you experience when you help others. Ask for help!

Taking the time to do what makes you happy, aside from your work, is such an important aspect in maintaining a balanced lifestyle that it should be a top priority when it comes to caring for yourself. Steal time if you must – if you are caring for a family member, put aside things that can wait until later (laundry, dishes, grocery shopping), and do something quick and enjoyable instead – those tasks will be waiting and can still be done at a later time, but stealing some time for yourself can be the break to help you get through. If you are in a paid position and caring for someone who has not enough help and you need a break, you must have that conversation with the person requiring services to assure you can stay healthy enough to continue in your position.

Once you get the relief from your caregiving duties, pamper yourself. Again, what is pampering for one does not work for all. Keep it healthy, keep it positive, focus to your needs and most of all enjoy your time. If you can remember to put your needs right up there with everyone else's, you will be better off helping those folk who rely on you for their care.

Caring for the caregiver to avoid burnout is a team effort and it should be part of the conversation every supervisor has with their caregiver.