



FAMILY CAREGIVER ALLIANCE®
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Caregiver Isolation and Loneliness

The Impact on Caregiver Health and Strategies for Staying Well

Just eighteen months ago, Kelly felt like she was a different person. At the time, her career and her husband were her top priority. Kelly was able to spend long days at her job and relaxing weekends away in the mountains with her husband. Since then, Kelly's mom was diagnosed with dementia. Being the only child, Kelly has become the primary caregiver for her mother who is becoming increasingly agitated and confused. Kelly now spends her weekends looking after her mom. She has cut her work days short to manage her *mom's* medical appointments and other care needs. While Kelly loves her mother and wants only the best care for her, she is finding herself feeling increasingly lost as her new life includes less balance and more focus on her mother than herself. Kelly is not alone in her struggles as a family caregiver. Statistics reveal that between 40 and 70% of family caregivers experience clinical symptoms of depression, which can often be caused by feelings of isolation and loneliness associated with the caregiving experience. It can be a dark and difficult period for those caregivers who experience these feelings of isolation.

Causes of Caregiver Isolation and Loneliness

For caregivers like Kelly, feelings of isolation and loneliness can be caused by a withdrawal from previous habits and lifestyle. While friends continue on their daily routines, some caregivers are left to feel alone in their caregiving duties. Likewise, caregivers without support from other caregivers in similar situations may feel as though no one really understands their situation. This can lead to a withdrawal from social activities and relationships that they previously enjoyed. However, some caregivers may also find that they are literally facing isolation. For instance, a spouse caring for their partner may be providing care on a 24 hour basis, and feel unable to leave their care recipient. Thus, their time for personal rejuvenation is reduced to nothing, as they focus on only their care recipient – spending time away from home only for doctor visits or weekly runs to the grocery store. The lack of social interaction and stimulation from individuals other than their care recipient, especially when cognitive impairment is present, can be an undeniable trigger for loneliness.

Impacts of Caregiver Isolation

While feeling alone in your struggles as a caregiver will have obvious emotional impacts, there can also be unexpected physical side effects caused by the onset of depression. Caregivers report weight gain due to emotional eating, increased blood pressure caused by stress—both of which can contribute to complications such as diabetes, stroke or even premature death. Although not all caregivers will experience such serious physical and emotional effects caused by isolation or loneliness, even the slightest feeling of being alone in your journey as a caregiver can have a significant impact on your overall well-being; making you less able to focus on work, family and responsibilities outside of your care recipient.

Strategies for Staying Well One of the best ways to combat isolation and loneliness is to build some time into your caregiving routine to focus on yourself. While this may sound like a fantasy to

caregivers who are already strapped for time, there are some ways to help re-connect to the people and activities that help restore your sense of connection and contentment . . .

- **Respite Care:** Periods of respite care can allow a caregiver to focus on their own personal needs without worrying about the safety of their care recipient. Respite services are typically available from home care agencies, or via local programs, such as your local Area Agency on Aging. However, you may also find that friends and family are able to assist you in caregiving duties from time to time, allowing you the time to focus on your own well-being.
- **Finding Support:** While your friends, or even your spouse, may not seem to understand what you're going through, there are people in similar situations feeling the same way. Local support groups or online support forums may help you find common ground with caregivers in similar situations and offer a feeling of community in the midst of your isolation.
- **Maintaining Your Sense of Self:** Use the time that you do have for yourself to participate in activities that make you feel renewed. Whether you enjoy yoga, walks on a local trail, or even a movie and dinner at home with your family, involvement in your own interests may help you feel connected to your sense of self and help keep you in touch with your friends and loved ones. Even if they don't completely understand what you're going through, you may find that these individuals offer support in a different way.

Feeling alone is an issue that most caregivers will face to some degree during their journey as a caregiver. However, caregivers need not feel ashamed in their journey to find more support.

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