

How do I Manage Caregiver Fatigue?

AUTHOR: SUSAN C. IMKE, RN, MS

Caregiver stress is, unfortunately, a part of life when caring for someone with a chronic illness such as PD – especially over an extended period of time. “Compassion fatigue” and even exhaustion can take a toll on your physical and emotional health. How can you and those people in your expanded circle of support recognize the signs of caregiver fatigue, and identify constructive ways of coping with the situation?



SIGNS OF CAREGIVER FATIGUE:

- An ongoing tendency to ignore or postpone taking care of own health needs.
- Growing feelings of isolation, as in, “Nobody knows or understands what is really going on with us.”
- Feelings of anxiety, uncertainty about the future, “waiting for the other shoe to drop” which can trigger verbal or even physical abuse of the care recipient.
- Feelings of anger at the care recipient or situation, often followed by guilt.
- Feelings of profound tiredness, exhaustion not relieved by sleep.
- Emotional strain/stress, often manifesting as varying physical symptoms.
- An inability to concentrate or make decisions.
- Bitterness toward friends or relatives who “should help more.”
- Tendency to use alcohol or drugs to try to lessen stress levels.
- Depression, despair, feelings of hopelessness.

SO WHAT CAN I DO TO FEEL BETTER?

- Schedule a meeting with key friends and family members to candidly discuss what’s happening with you and your loved one with Parkinson’s disease.*
- Have the courage to share your feelings of isolation, and disappointment that friends have stopped coming to visit or that family members are not supportive in the ways you need.
- Make a short list of *specific* tasks that would help you take better care of your loved one and get some much-needed respite, i.e. “*Could you come every other Tuesday to take Frank to the barber and out to lunch?*” Be honest if lack of funds is a constant worry; perhaps someone in your circle might be able to help with medication costs for one month, or pick up groceries for you once a week.
- Ask for one or two volunteers to be “on call” for you during particularly bad days.
- Not everyone needs to seek counseling to cope with the burdens of extended caregiving, but all caregivers need an inner circle of friends they can call day or night without feeling like they are imposing.
- Many overburdened caregivers do need short-term professional counseling.

**If the caregiver is reluctant to call the meeting, a concerned friend or family member can do so on behalf of the fatigued caregiver.*

**To help determine your level of emotional distress, go to the web site:
www.depression-screening.org/caregiver.**

**Visit the NPF Caregivers Forum:
a place for caregivers to find support and address their concerns, www.parkinson.org.**

Family Caregiving Alliance, National Center on Caregiving, is a public voice for caregivers.

Visit www.caregiver.org
to use the Family Care Navigator
(State-by-State help for Family Caregivers).