

Caregiving for the heart patient

- It is mandatory that a patient have a caregiver before going through certain types of procedures or surgeries! Caregivers are a required part of the process!
- As a caregiver you are required to provide all kinds of support:
 - Emotional: helping with feelings, supporting the patient through ups and downs, dealing with mood swings, being the emotional “sounding board”
 - Physical: lifting, helping with stairs, bathing, dressing, doing chores patient used to do
 - Financial: possibly being the sole income of the household if patient cannot work
 - Social: entertaining, providing updates to family/friends, being the “connector”
 - Psychological: coping with a chronic illness, dealing with depression, anxiety
 - Existential/spiritual: thinking about death/dying, uncertainty about the future, reviewing you and your loved one’s life and its meaning
 - Logistical: insurance concerns, completing paperwork, providing transportation, working, caring for other family members, being an advocate for the patient
- As a caregiver for a heart patient, you may encounter the following issues:
 - Feelings of loss: loss of the life you once had, loss of health, independence, employment, friends/family, travel
 - Changes in the caregiver/patient relationship: patient becomes the person who needs cared for, this can lead to anger and resentment
 - Emotional ups and downs for patient (and caregiver): due to medications, changes in the life you once had, complications post surgery, being in and out of the hospital, experiencing a wide range of emotions often times maybe in the same day!
 - Isolation: feeling like you are alone and have no one to turn to
 - Guilt: patients and families can experience “survivor’s guilt”; personal feelings of guilt for leaving the patient at home or in the hospital, of not being there all the time

Signs and symptoms of stress and burnout in caregiving

- Increased irritation or agitation
- Persistent blame of yourself or others
- Sleep or appetite disturbances
- Clinical depression: not just “the blues” for a few days, but several symptoms persisting over the course of more than 2 weeks (significant weight loss/gain, persistent feelings of guilt, lack of interest or pleasure in things you enjoy doing, lack of energy, lack of ability to focus or concentrate, suicidal thoughts)
- Difficulty in thinking or processing information
- Feeling overwhelmed all the time
- Bodily symptoms: stomach upset, frequent headaches, tension, muscle aches
- Neglecting your own health or other important facets of your life (work, children, etc.)
- Use of unhealthy coping mechanisms (alcohol, drugs, emotional eating, etc.)

Relieving stress and preventing burnout

- Set healthy boundaries for yourself and the person you care for: decide on realistic limits for the amount of time you will dedicate for caregiving, realize you are not the patient's doctor or nurse but are the patient's family member, and set limits.
- Take a break every day for yourself, if only for small moments of time.
- Don't do it alone! Enlist other family members, friends, or people in the community to help.
- Use meditation, prayer, deep breathing, or progressive muscle relaxation (starting at the tip of your head, tense each muscle group in your body for 10 seconds and then release, work all the way down to your toes).
- Exercise! Even a brisk 10-15 minute walk outside will improve your energy, release muscle tension, and help clear your mind.
- Develop and maintain relationships outside of your relationship with the patient: visit weekly or go out to dinner with friends or other relatives without the patient, join a social group (book club, church organization, exercise class, etc.)
- Treat yourself to something special: a massage, buying flowers, a new outfit, a movie out with a friend.
- Quit smoking, reduce caffeine amounts, eat healthy foods .
- Plan your days to achieve a sense of balance.
- Reflect on this journey you have been on: tell your story to a friend, create a journal.
- Rediscover your relationship with the patient: re-focus on your marriage, friendship, relationship as father/mother/sister/brother/daughter/son/friend, etc; plan a fun day or trip together where you don't talk about one another's health or heart problems; take time each week to focus on your relationship and the positives in it.
- Talk with other caregivers who have been in your situation.
- Seek a job or volunteer opportunity outside of the home.
- **Realize self care is not a luxury, it is a necessity!**

Where to find help

- Seek assistance from a professional counselor or therapist
- Your family physician or employee assistance program
- Local hospitals, senior centers, or healthcare/wellness clinics
- Attend local support groups or start your own! Many local hospitals have support groups. The Central Ohio Area Agency on Aging (www.coaaa.org) is another great resource to contact to find local support groups in your area.
- Visit these websites for more information: www.caregiverstress.com, www.caringinfo.org, www.caregiver.com, www.tripleheart.org/caregivers.html, www.transplantbuddies.org/, www.changeofheartssupport.com/