

Partners in Care

By Lisa M. Petsche

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Caregiving Today: A Snapshot

In approximately thirty percent of American households, unpaid care is provided on a regular basis to someone who is chronically ill, disabled or advanced in age, and whose ability to carry out the necessary activities of living is compromised as a result.

In most cases, family members and friends – known as informal caregivers - provide all of the help that the care receiver needs. Without their assistance, the care receiver might otherwise have to move to some type of residential care setting.

It's not necessary to live under the same roof as the person one is helping, or to provide assistance with personal or medical care, in order to be considered a caregiver.

Who are the Caregivers?

The typical caregiver is an adult child providing help to a parent or, less often, a parent-in-law. But a caregiver may also be, in order from most to least likely, a friend or neighbor, grandchild, sibling or other extended family member, spouse or parent.

The majority of caregivers are female. On average they spend up to 50 percent more time on caregiving-related tasks than their male counterparts.

Caregivers most often fall into the 45 to 65 age group and the majority are married. Those at the younger end of this group are likely to have children still at home and consequently have been labeled “the sandwich generation.” A significant proportion of caregivers are older themselves – in other words, younger seniors caring for older seniors. The older they are, the more likely they are to have health issues of their own, resulting in added stress and risk.

Close to two-thirds of family caregivers are employed in a full-time or part-time capacity. These people are juggling caregiving with paid work, not to mention other responsibilities such as maintaining their own household and attending to other family members. It's no surprise, therefore, that self-care is usually a low priority for caregivers, if it's even on their radar at all.

Who are the Care Receivers?

The typical recipient of care is female, over 70 years of age, widowed and living alone. The older the care receiver, the more likely they are to require personal care. Half of those over 85 fall into this category. The 85-plus age group is, of course, a rapidly growing segment of the population.

The most common types of health conditions associated with care needs are age-related – for example, osteoporosis, arthritis and vision loss. Other common medical diagnoses of care receivers are cancer, heart disease (such as stroke), neurological disease (such as Parkinson's disease), dementia and mental illness (such as depression).



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Types of Caregiving Activities

Caregiving tasks fall into two categories: basic activities of daily living (known as ADLs or BADLs) and instrumental activities of daily living (IADLs).

ADLs are basic, daily self-care tasks including feeding, toileting, dressing, grooming, bathing and mobilizing. Less than 25 percent of caregiving situations involve helping with these needs.

IADLs are the more complex skills involved in living independently – skills normally learned during adolescence and early adulthood. They include using the telephone, way finding, managing transportation (whether it's driving or using public transit), handling finances, shopping, preparing meals, managing medications, performing housework and performing basic indoor and outdoor home maintenance.

Typically, care receivers need help with IADLs before they require help with ADLs. In fact, the first indicator of cognitive impairment when someone develops dementia is difficulty managing IADLs, which demand a higher level of mental functioning.

The most commonly provided type of caregiving help is transportation. This involves taking the person to medical appointments and social and leisure activities and on errands such as shopping and banking. Other common types of assistance that relatives and friends provide are home and yard maintenance, house cleaning and meal preparation.

Reflection

To help ensure that informal caregiving is sustainable and remains a rewarding experience over time, it's important for those providing care to make use of available help. This includes obtaining assistance from family members and friends as well as taking advantage of community services that can help maximize the care receiver's functioning and assist the caregiver with necessary tasks. Doing so improves the quality of life of not only the caregiver but also the care receiver.

Note: Statistics were obtained from the National Alliance for Caregiving, Family Caregiver Alliance and Caregiver Action Network.