



## In Sickness and In Health: Caring For Your Spouse

Date updated: October 15, 2007

By Christina Breda Antoniadis

Content provided by Revolution Health Group

As a caregiver for your spouse, you face many of the same responsibilities as any of the 44 million Americans who are currently providing unpaid care for another adult. Like them, you'll face a host of challenges -- emotional, physical and financial -- in tending to your loved one.

But spouses typically are the least likely of all the caregiver types to ask for help, says Suzanne Mintz, author of *Love, Honor and Value: A Family Caregiver Speaks Out About the Choices and Challenges of Caregiving* (Capital Books, 2002) and president and co-founder of the National Family Caregivers Association.

That means they may be on their own when it comes to dealing with the stresses of providing care.

Just how much stress you're feeling may depend on how much care you're giving. The care you provide may be as simple as helping a spouse with limited mobility or as complex as taking on full responsibility for finances and helping your spouse to eat, bathe and go to the bathroom.

### Taking its toll

Whether it's your spouse or a distant relative, caring for another adult can be physically exhausting. Coping with another person who may be in chronic pain, depressed or suffering from dementia can also be emotionally draining.

Women who care for their spouses may find that their efforts are most needed at a time when their own health is deteriorating. "As people age, obviously, all of our bodies wind down so that you can't do now what you could do before," says Mintz, who has long been a caregiver for a husband with multiple sclerosis.

Caregivers in general often report that their own health suffers because they have no time or energy to tend to themselves, says Dan Taylor, a life care advisor and creator of the Parent Care Solution (<http://www.parentcaresolution.com>), a North Carolina-based organization that guides families in planning ahead for long-term care. "The physical aspect of being a caregiver is simply overwhelming," Taylor says. "There's an interesting statistic that 40% of caregivers end up suffering from the signs of clinical depression due to the overwhelming responsibility."

Finally, women may struggle with the realities of their changing role. "You go from being a companion and lover and spouse to a full-time caregiver. The change from that perspective totally changes the relationship dynamic," says Taylor, author of *The Parent Care Conversation: Six Strategies for Dealing with the Emotional and Financial Challenges of Aging Parents* (Penguin, 2006).

For women in the caregiver role for their spouses, Taylor and Mintz have this advice:

Talk to your spouse in advance if possible. Ask your husband how he wants you to care for him. Does he envision you providing all the care? Do you want to be cared for in your home? How does he feel about being cared for in a residential facility?

Be realistic about the possibilities. Take stock of your finances and the limitations of your current surrounding. You may find that certain options are out of your reach, while others simply aren't practical in your circumstances, Taylor says. "Eighty-six percent of Americans want to stay in their homes, but 95% of homes aren't designed to let them do that," he adds.

Lay the groundwork for care. If you have elderly family members, "make sure you start talking to care facilities 2 to 4 years before you'll need them," Taylor says. Line up relationships with an at-home care provider and an elder care physician, too, he adds. "Roughly 60% of the elder care physicians in this country will be retiring over the next 15 years. What I see is a waiting list (in the future for) an elder care physician."

Make a backup plan. "One of the things that certainly need to be considered is, -- What if you die?" Mintz points out. "Who is going to care for your spouse? To provide for him, you may want to consider life insurance or other funding methods. All of that needs to be worked through."

Think about your own future. "It often happens that all the money gets used up on John. And then when Mary needs care, it's not available for her. It's more likely she'll have to buy services if she's the surviving person," says Mintz, who advises to not only think about the ill spouse but about your own care will be paid for in the future.

learn how to lift properly in order to avoid back strain, Mintz says.

Get help. "It's important for people to realize that help comes in lots of different forms. Knowing that somebody is going to be taking care of your lawn -- that's help," Mintz says. "If you get help with some of the basic activities of life, rather than with the actual caregiving, that can reduce some of the stress you have."

Create a network of support. Tell people in your community about your circumstances. "It's very difficult to do, but you have to give up a little pride," Mintz says. When her husband fell in the shower, Mintz had to ask a male neighbor for help in lifting him. "And there he is naked, so it's something you've got to get over. Once you get over that, when you need help, you're going to have it," she adds. Seek out other caregivers as well. Talking to them can provide emotional support.

Learn about services offered to caregivers. States increasingly are offering programs aimed at helping caregivers, according to a new report by the American Association of Retired Persons ([www.AARP.org](http://www.AARP.org)). Programs may offer payment for in-home care, adult day care services, home delivered meals and respite care.

## References

The National Family Caregivers Association ([www.thefamilycaregiver.org](http://www.thefamilycaregiver.org)) offers empowerment, education and advocacy for caregivers, including tips on coping and links to resources.

The Parent Care Solution (<http://www.parentcaresolution.com/>) is a lifetime program for the health, maintenance and welfare of parents who may be unable to care for themselves now or in the future. The goal is to do so without destroying the financial or emotional structure of the family.

The National Alliance for Caregiving (<http://www.caregiving.org>) is dedicated to providing support to family caregivers and the professionals who help them and to increasing public awareness of issues facing family caregivers.

Caregiver.com (<http://www.caregiver.com/>) is a magazine and website for caregivers.

The National Family Caregiver Resource Room ([http://www.aoa.gov/prof/aoaprogram/caregiver/careprof/nfcsp\\_projects/nfcsp\\_projects.asp](http://www.aoa.gov/prof/aoaprogram/caregiver/careprof/nfcsp_projects/nfcsp_projects.asp)) is a service provided by the Department of Health and Human Services.

Reviewed by: [Val Jones, MD](#)

Date reviewed: January 31, 2007

©2006 Revolution Health Group, LLC. All rights reserved