Providing care for your child is part of the job of being a parent. However, if the level of care you provide supersedes what the typical parent provides for a child of the same age then you are a caregiver. Warnings of the stress of caregiving are becoming more prominent as many aging baby-boomers now require care from their adult children. But what about parents who are forever their child’s caregiver to some degree and the effects of this life-long stress? What can we do to help manage the stress?

First, let’s clarify the kind of stress that causes concern. Basically, there are three kinds of stress – acute stress, episodic acute stress, and chronic stress. Acute stress comes from daily demands and pressures such as keeping to a schedule and may produce symptoms such as tension headaches or heartburn. When acute stress is experienced frequently, it is called episodic acute stress. People whose lives seem chaotic and those who seem to always be crisis suffer from episodic acute stress. These folks are short-tempered, irritable, anxious, and tense. In an extreme form, this person is depicted as the “Type A” personality at risk of developing hypertension, stroke, and heart problems.

Chronic stress, the focus of this article, is described as “the grinding stress that wears people away day after day, year after year”. In The Stress Solution by Lyle H. Miller, Ph.D., and Alma Dell Smith, Ph.D., chronic stress is further described as “the stress of unrelenting demands and pressures for seemingly interminable periods of time.” Physical and mental resources of persons subjected to chronic stress get depleted over time and, according to Miller and Smith, people get so used to this stress they forget that its there. It is my hope that by reading this article you will acknowledge the presence of chronic stress in your life and the importance of taking action to reduce its impact on you and your family.

When a parent is feeling stressed it affects the functioning of the entire family. A stressed parent is likely to have much less patience and be short-tempered. Such negative reactions to situations that would otherwise not be problematic often create additional relationship strains between family members. Soon all members experience ill feelings about themselves as well as the ones they love. Additionally, our children are likely to follow our model of how to handle stress – are we providing a good model for them?

Moreover, reducing stress is a preventative measure for a number of health issues. My doctor regularly inquires about reducing stress in my life and I instantly “poo-poo” his probe. “Like there is anything I can do about the stress in my life,” I quip. The truth is (gulp) there are a number of actions we can take to reduce the level of stress we experience. Although there are indeed a large number of stressful situations we cannot make disappear, we can counter the stress-producing aspects of our life by focusing on taking care of the caregiver.
Caregivers, however, are by nature and by habit more likely to constantly give care than to take a break to meet a need of their own. However, if we want to be the best caregiver we can be, and for as long as we possibly can be, then **it is our duty** to write our care into the schedule and treat it as sacred as we do our child’s therapies or treatments! Add a section to your child’s Care Notebook for yourself or start a separate notebook. Write down your commitment to stress management and the plan you will follow. Set goals and revisit them regularly. Log your stress management activities and note the positive effects such as how you feel and improvements in your ability to communicate with your family and professionals. These tactics will help you stay committed to taking care of yourself. Making stress management activities a priority is one of the best things you can do for your entire family.

What is prescribed as care for the caregiver? “Learn to accept or change stressful and tense situations whenever possible” says the National Mental Health Association. They also offer a number of suggestions which I have adapted here:

**Be Realistic.** If you are feeling stress from being overwhelmed, eliminate activities that are not absolutely necessary. Consider what really needs to be done, how much you can do, what adjustments you can make, and who you can enroll to help you.

**Explore different perspectives.** Imagine viewing the situation through a telephoto lens of a camera. Perhaps the current issue causing a fuss isn’t really such a big deal when you view it as part of “the big picture”. If you are feeling overwhelmed by all that needs attending, zoom in to only one task at a time. When that task is completed take time to pat yourself on the back for your accomplishment, only then should you move on to the next task.

**Be Flexible.** Consider others perspectives and opinions and be prepared to compromise. If you are willing to meet others halfway they are likely to agree. If you must stand your ground firmly, do so calmly as arguing only increases stress.

**Exercise.** Good for the mind, body, and soul – exercise works off tension, allows your mind to clear, and elevates your mood. Repetitive activities such as running, walking, swimming and biking don’t require conscious direction so your mind is free to wander at will. More intense workouts like kickboxing burn off tension and aggression. (Marlien Rentmeester, *Self*, March 2002, p. 148.)

**Meditate.** Listen to music, relax, and think of pleasant things or nothing at all. If you prefer, simply enjoy quiet reflection. Personally, I have always found any body of water casts a calming spell on me.

**Hobbies.** If you think you don’t have enough time for a hobby you used to engage in, first spend some time thinking about how you can streamline the activity. Go to the supply shop and investigate what “helpers” and shortcut exist to make it possible for you to enjoy your hobby – perhaps slightly altered.

**Utilize your social supports.** Don’t try to cope alone. Talk with friends or family or connect with others facing similar challenges. Many find support groups helpful for relieving stress, making friends, and learning about other resources to help alleviate some of the situations that may be causing you stress.

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