

I'm Not a Caregiver....Am I?

An estimated 43.5 million people in the United States provide care for an older adult family member and most of them do not identify themselves as a “caregiver.” Rather, they think, "I'm not a caregiver, I am just doing what family does for family." Simply put, caregiving is performing tasks for family members or friends who cannot perform those tasks for themselves, but the caregiving experience is really much more than that. A good friend once said to me that caregiving means being a compassionate person who chooses to share the responsibility for another person's well-being and who chooses to take on new, unexpected challenges. So, how do you know if you are a caregiver and why does it matter?

Taking on the role of caregiving comes with unique and sometimes difficult challenges that can lead to health problems for the caregiver. Caregiver challenges, or stressors, typically fall into two categories, primary and secondary. Primary stressors are those that result from the type and amount of care the care recipient needs. These are usually related to changes in functional limitations due to health, memory, decision making, or personality. Other primary stressors include difficulties experienced while providing care, such as the presence of disturbing behaviors or the care recipients' resistance to receiving help. These challenges can result in the caregiver feeling exhausted, overwhelmed, uncertain about what to do, or where to get help to deal with these problems.

Secondary stressors develop from primary stressors and consist of two types, role strains and thoughts about caregiving. Although the term “secondary” implies that the stressor is less demanding, they are in fact just as challenging, if not more so, than primary stressors. Role strains occur when existing life roles intersect and compete with demands on your time. These can include family, employment, economic, and social demands. You may find that more and

more often you are having to limit or restrict one of your life roles, for example being a wife, mother, or employee, in order to meet the demands of caregiving. Taking phone calls at work, missing work days to take the care recipient to appointments or to manage their care puts additional demands on your time and interrupts your work role. Loss of time at work can result in unplanned financial changes that can affect the entire family. Increased caregiving demands can also result in increased social stressors and loss of social support including cherished social relationships, hobbies, and pleasurable activities. In addition to competing role demands, sometimes becoming the main caregiver for a loved one reignites long standing family conflicts or generates new ones. These conflicts may exist between the caregiver and care recipient or between the caregiver and other family members and can add significant burden and stress to the caregiver.

These stressors can have a huge impact on caregiver well-being, but how you view how well you are managing caregiving responsibilities, or how much support you are getting from others, can affect overall well-being. If the primary and secondary stressors or family conflicts are high, caregiving can lead to feelings of depression and result in negative effects on physical and emotional health. But, not all caregivers find their role challenging or difficult. Some thrive in their role as caregiver, and there are ways to adjust the caregiving situation to reduce the negative effects, increase the positive aspects, and possibly improve overall well-being. Learning strategies to cope with caregiving strains, stress and burden can be reduced and a sense of growth, competence, and fulfillment can be experienced.

Services that provide such strategies to help you and your family throughout the caregiver journey and to help you grow as a caregiver are available in the Pikes Peak Region. If you are experiencing any of the caregiving challenges described in this article, if you are

concerned about your loved one, even if you are not directly caring for a loved one, you may be a caregiver. The University of Colorado Colorado Springs Aging Center (UCCS AC) provides caregiver support services and can, with eligibility, provide 6-8 free group and/or individual caregiving therapy sessions. If you would like more information on caregiving services available in the Pikes Peak Region please contact the UCCS AC at 719-255-8002 or the Pikes Peak Area Agency on Aging 719-471-7080.