

Care for the CAREGIVER

Stress, anxiety, and burnout are never far from the doorsteps of millions of Americans who are caregivers as they often juggle the responsibilities of providing daily care for a loved one with dementia or another condition with the added demands of working, maintaining a household, or raising children.

Too often caregivers don't know how to ask for help, and friends and family members aren't sure of how to lend a hand.

"Caregivers will say 'no' when offered help because they worry it will reflect poorly on them or because they 'don't want to bother' others. And some caregivers get so attached to their role that they just can't let go," said Nancy Alterman, a licensed clinical social worker with the New Jersey Institute for Successful Aging at the UMDNJ-School of Osteopathic Medicine.

If you know a family member or close friend who is a caregiver, Alterman offers the following suggestions to help ease that person's burden.

- Be sensitive about visiting by calling ahead to schedule a time that is convenient. But if the caregiver routinely declines offers of a visit, you may need to just show up with special foods or an easy activity like a puzzle.
- Avoid bringing a crowd, but visiting with at least one other person gives the caregiver a chance to go out with a friend, knowing that another trusted person is there for the patient's needs.
- Instead of asking, "What can I do?" offer to grocery shop, go to the post office, do laundry or cook a meal that you can bring over.
- Be a good listener. Whether in person or by phone, sometimes just having a contact to the outside world is all the caregiver needs to help cope with that day's burden.
- Be alert for signs of caregiver stress, such as denial, social withdrawal, sleeplessness, or lack of concentration.
- Offer to spend the night so the caregiver can get some rest. Lack of sleep can quickly lead to a deteriorating situation or a health crisis. Make sure the caregiver and the patient are discussing any sleep issues with their doctors.
- Research adult medical day services in your community and share that information with the caregiver. These medically supervised programs can actually help extend the time that the patient can remain at home.

