

During the COVID-19 pandemic, your EAP is available for counseling sessions using video or phone

## Balanced Living – March 2021

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### Caring for the Caregiver

In Oregon, Nicki makes weekly phone calls to her sister Rebecca, who has Alzheimer's. Rebecca lives 3,000 miles away in New York City.

Stephanie and Doug share a New Jersey home with Stephanie's frail mother. They give her round-the-clock aid.

And Ruth, who lives in Maryland, does the food shopping and cooking for her neighbor Scott, 93.

These people have one thing in common: They're family caregivers.

"Family caregiving is the fastest-growing unpaid and often unacknowledged occupation in this country," says Lorraine Sailor, operations coordinator at Children of Aging Parents, a nonprofit charitable organization based in Levittown, Pa.

A recent survey by the National Family Caregivers Association (NFCA) found more than 54 million people give care each year. About 56 percent are women, according to the survey.



Caregivers come in all shapes and sizes. They can be adult children, spouses, siblings, friends, or neighbors, who help with daily activities such as bathing, feeding, and clothing. The caregiver may be the only person who can take a loved one to doctors' appointments. The long-distance caregiver may call weekly, help with expenses, or support the main caregiver.

More than one relative helps out in some families, but most caregivers go it alone. The NFCA survey found three out of four caregivers don't get consistent family help.

"Caregiving can be a truly rewarding experience," says NFCA co-founder and President Suzanne Mintz. It can be a time to heal old wounds, end conflicts, and improve relationships. It can be a chance to serve a loved one.

But caregiving also can be demanding and time-consuming. It may even raise your risk of stress-related disorders.

"Many of us believe in honoring our parents and take our marriage vows seriously," Ms. Mintz says. "But the work of caregiving goes well beyond what we can do. Asking for help is a sign of your love and caring, not of weakness and shame. It is much more than a one-person job."

## How to Succeed

These tips are drawn from professional, government, and charitable groups: the American Society on Aging, the Federal Administration on Aging, the Family Caregiver Alliance, Children of Aging Parents, and the National Family Caregivers Association.

## Don't Go It Alone

- Ask others for help. Start with family and friends. Keep less engaged family members informed. Set up a family conference, seek suggestions, and talk about disagreements.
- Ask families with similar problems how they handled them.
- Involve the person you're caring for. If possible, help the person take responsibility and join in decisions.
- Learn about your loved one's condition. Find specialists for information and guidance.
- Tap local, state, and national resources. They can offer help with transportation, nutrition, or day care.

## Watch for Problems

Mental and physical signs of caregiver stress:

- A lot of anger or fear
- A tendency to overreact
- Feeling depressed, isolated, or overburdened
- Thoughts of guilt, shame, or inadequacy
- Taking on more than you can handle
- Headaches
- Digestive upsets
- Weight loss or gain
- Trouble sleeping
- Fatigue
- Illness

## Take Time Out

Be good to yourself. Take time away from caregiving and don't neglect your personal and professional needs:

- Get lots of rest and exercise
- Enjoy relaxing music
- Eat nutritious meals
- Visit with friends and plan leisure activities
- Do deep breathing
- Read a magazine
- Don't abuse alcohol or drugs, or overeat
- Keep a sense of humor

- Write your feelings in a journal
- Do spiritual meditation
- Set limits on what you can and cannot do
- Realize you're doing the best you can
- Join a support group
- Use community resources for help

## Get Help

It's OK not to have all the answers. Seek help when you need it most:

- Call a support hotline. Just having someone listen may help.
- Speak with a counselor. A professional can help you understand your situation.
- Talk with your religious adviser.
- Attend a support group. Groups can explain your loved one's condition, ease tension, and provide a sense of what's important.

## General Assistance

- [AARP](#): Advocacy group with publications on aging, including recent legislation.
- [Children of Aging Parents](#): Information on caregiving and referrals to support groups, care managers, and other resources.
- [Family Caregiver Alliance](#): Covers medical, social, public policy, and caregiving issues linked to brain impairments.
- [National Council on Aging](#): Information and advocacy.
- [National Family Caregivers Association](#): Dedicated to aiding caregivers through education, research, and support.
- [National Institute on Aging](#): Conducts and supports research, training, and information on aging.
- [Well Spouse Foundation](#): Offers support to people caring for a sick spouse who need emotional care themselves.
- Religious organizations often provide additional assistance.

## Specific Ailments

- [Alcoholics Anonymous](#): Fellowship and self-help group.
- [Alzheimer's Association](#)
- [American Cancer Society](#)
- [American Heart Association](#)
- [National Parkinson Foundation](#)
- [National Stroke Association](#)

# The Power of Forgiveness

Forgiving someone who has hurt you deeply — a parent, sibling, spouse, ex-spouse, employer, or even a stranger is one of the most difficult challenges you'll face in life.

Until you can forgive, anger, resentment, and bitterness will continue to eat away at your heart and mind, causing emotional and even physical damage because of increased stress.

"Not forgiving means you carry in your heart the pain the person has caused you," says Kathleen Griffin, author of *The Forgiveness Formula: How to Let Go of Your Pain and Move on With Life*. "Not letting go of this burden can keep you trapped in the past and unable to move forward into a better future."

People who have been deeply hurt often say there's a "before" and "after" the hurt occurred. They remember the time before the hurt as one without problems, and withholding forgiveness becomes a way of trying to go back to how things used to be.

"But to begin the journey of forgiveness, you need to give up hope of things being as they were before the hurt occurred," says Ms. Griffin. "Your life is different, and accepting that what happened to you really did occur, but that you can forgive and let go of the pain it caused, is the first step."

## Lighten your load

Choosing to forgive and it is a choice can make a significant difference in your peace of mind and future happiness.

"Think of people you know who can forgive," says Ms. Griffin. "Now think of those who bear a grudge. Which camp would you rather be in?"

To imagine the difference forgiveness could make in your life, think about a time when you took a trip and packed too much. Remember how grateful you were to put down your bags and not have to carry them anymore?

"Your forgiveness issues are just the same," says Ms. Griffin. "You may not be conscious of carrying them every day, but they weigh you down just the same. Imagine letting go of the burden of your resentment and anger, and think about how much easier your life journey would be."

## Practice forgiveness

Make two lists: an "easy" list of people who have not done you a great wrong but with whom you still have issues, and a "hard" list of those who have hurt you deeply. Begin by working to forgive the people on the easy list first.

"Forgiveness doesn't mean forgetting what was done to you, but it does mean completely letting go of the hurt someone has caused you, because you have decided to do so," says Ms. Griffin. "Forgiveness is never about the other person. It's all about you and your decision to live a less painful and more liberated life."

Writing in a forgiveness journal can help. In the journal, note how you feel about forgiveness and where you are in the process.

### Other ideas

Meditate to help center and calm your spirit. Sit quietly with your eyes closed and become conscious of your breathing.

Take "life breaths" to help you cope with negative emotions. Choose a word that describes your feelings, such as anger, fear, or hate. As you take a deep, slow breath in through your nose, imagine you're breathing in the opposite words: hope, love, or peace. Now slowly and deeply breathe out through your mouth, breathing out the fear, anger, and hate.

Visualize a forgiveness room. Imagine a room deep within your heart. The room contains all the bitterness and sadness of not forgiving. Open that room, clean it, and little by little, make it a part of yourself again so that no part of your heart is shut down.

"As the years pass, you may have people who seem beyond your power to forgive," says Ms. Griffin. "But you always have a choice: Do I choose to hold on to bitterness or to forgive? To forgive is to say, 'It stops here. With me.'"

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