

# EMBRACE Your Journey

## Relationships: Supporting Caregivers

**Caregivers** are an important part of a patient's care team. Caregivers are often the critical component that brings a patient's treatment to a successful conclusion. Frequently, caregivers become so involved in caring for their loved ones that they place their own needs behind those of the patient. This leads to stress and can ultimately result in caregivers being unable to care for their loved ones.

This course is designed to support the caregiver relationship by helping caregivers develop an awareness of their own stress levels and skills to alleviate stress.

The focus of this section is to:

- Help you identify common symptoms of stress in caregivers
- Help you examine your own stress level
- Give you tools to alleviate stress related to the role of caregiver



### Check your knowledge about caregiver stress and support.

- Check what you know about caregiver stress and support before you review this section.
- When you are done with this section, please complete this same test again. (A second copy and answers are located at the end of this section.)
- You will then be able to compare your answers and see how much you have learned.

**Directions:** Please select the answer (True or False) which you believe to be correct.

	True	False
1. Good caregivers always place the patient's needs above their own needs.	T	F
2. Caregiver stress is experienced by the majority of people caring for loved ones with cancer.	T	F
3. Anxiety and depression are just as common in caregivers as they are in patients.	T	F
4. Asking for help can reduce caregiver stress.	T	F
5. Feeling stressed is a sign that you are not a good caregiver.	T	F

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**Stress** is a part of life. Stress can be good or bad and can accompany positive life events or negative life events. When we experience stress, we experience it both physically and emotionally. People who are caring for a loved one with cancer often report increased stress. This is NOT a sign that you are not a good caregiver. This is a sign that you are experiencing a very common and expected part of caring for someone with cancer.

### Physical Signs of Stress

Read through these physical symptoms associated with stress. Circle the symptoms that **YOU** experience when you are feeling stressed.

Shortness of breath

Sweating

Headache

Muscle tension or pain

Difficulty sleeping

Increased appetite

Decreased appetite

Chest pain

Fatigue

Stomach upset

Neck pain

Back pain

What other physical signs of stress do you experience?

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### Emotional Signs of Stress

Read through these emotional and psychological symptoms associated with stress. Circle the symptoms that **YOU** experience when you are feeling stressed.

Forgetfulness

Irritability

Disorganized

Difficulty making decisions

Quick to anger

Lack of focus

Anxiety

Poor problem-solving skills

What other emotional or psychological symptoms do you experience with stress?

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### HOW ARE YOU?

Directions: Complete the following questionnaire and then review the next page for an evaluation of your current stress level.

During the past week or so, I have . . .

- |  |     |    |
|--|-----|----|
| 1. Had trouble keeping my mind on what I was doing   | Yes | No |
| 2. Felt that I couldn't leave my loved one alone   | Yes | No |
| 3. Had difficulty making decisions   | Yes | No |
| 4. Felt completely overwhelmed   | Yes | No |
| 5. Felt lonely   | Yes | No |
| 6. Been upset that my loved one has changed so much from his or her former self  | Yes | No |
| 7. Felt a loss of privacy and/or personal time   | Yes | No |
| 8. Been edgy or irritable  | Yes | No |
| 9. Had sleep disturbed because of caring for my loved one  | Yes | No |
| 10. Had a crying spell(s)  | Yes | No |
| 11. Felt strained between work and family responsibilities   | Yes | No |
| 12. Had back pain  | Yes | No |
| 13. Felt ill (headaches, stomach problems, or common cold)   | Yes | No |
| 14. Found my loved ones living situation to be inconvenient or a barrier to care   | Yes | No |
| 15. Been satisfied with the support my family has given me   | Yes | No |
| 16. Felt useful and needed   | Yes | No |
| 17. On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being "not stressful" to 10 being "extremely stressful," please rate your current level of stress. |     |    |
| 18. On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being "very healthy" to 10 being "very ill," please rate your current level of health.             |     |    |

(This questionnaire is reprinted from the American Medical Association.)

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### HOW ARE YOU?

Directions: To determine your score follow the directions below.

1. For questions 1-14, give yourself 1 point for each question answered “Yes.” \_\_\_\_\_
  2. For questions 15-16, give yourself 1 point for each questions answered “No.” \_\_\_\_\_
- TOTAL \_\_\_\_\_

You are likely experiencing a HIGH degree of stress if:

1. You answered “Yes” to either or both questions 4 and 10.
2. Your TOTAL score above is 10 or more.
3. Your score on question 17 is 6 or higher.
4. Your score on question 18 is 6 or higher.



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Now that you have completed the previous exercise, you should have a good idea of your current level of stress. You should also know how to use physical and emotional signs to help you identify your stress. As the common saying goes, “Knowing is half the battle.” Let’s examine techniques for managing stress, both in general and as it applies to the caregiver specifically.

### Healthful Techniques for Managing Stress

Deep breathing

Meditation

Guided imagery

Yoga

Physical exercise

Tai Chi

Prayer

Journaling

Listening to music

Spending time with loved ones

What other techniques for managing stress do you find helpful?

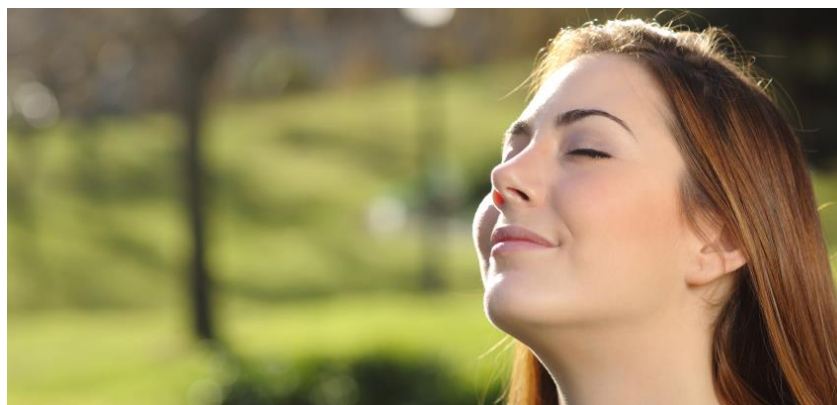
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**Caregivers** experience unique stressors that are specifically associated with caring for someone, physically, emotionally and spiritually. In fact, caregivers of patients with cancer report depression and anxiety as frequently as the patients themselves do. Because of this and because of the very important role of caregiver in the treatment of cancer patients, we want to introduce to you some specific techniques to manage the challenges associated with being a caregiver.

### **Get Educated**

The caregiver is often an important part of communication and patient education. Attend physician visits with your loved one if you are able. If you are not able to attend visits, talk with your clinical team about ways that you can communicate with them outside of office visits.

Keep a list of questions that you have for the doctor or nurse and bring this with you to your appointments. Don't be afraid to ask for clarification of medical terms or other things you don't understand.

Ask your clinical team for reliable sources of information on the internet or elsewhere that you can go for more information as you have questions.

### **Ask For Help**

Caregivers often feel overwhelmed with the changing and unpredictable demands of caregiving. Plan ahead by identifying people within your support system to whom you can delegate activities that relieve your burden.

Let the people who love and care for you, support you by helping with the “little things” — bringing a meal, assisting with transportation to and from appointments, communicating with other loved ones about treatment planning, providing “respite” by being a friendly visitor to your loved one or picking up medications from the pharmacy.

Ask your clinical team for community resources that may assist with some of these activities—like transportation, house cleaning and respite.

### **BREATHE**

You may find that your most stressful times are when you are unable to plan ahead or unable to identify anyone who can help. Remember that deep breathing, prayer, and meditation are very effective ways to manage stress and give you the peace of mind you need to make it through the toughest times.

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### Caring for the caregiver IS caring for the patient!

Put yourself and your needs back on the priority list. Good caregivers ask for help, get educated, breathe deep, and remember how to take care of themselves. Use the tool below to identify changes that you can make that will improve your own self-care and reduce your stress level.

**WHO** is in your life who you can ask for help? Make a list of these people and the tasks they might be able to help with. Place a star next to the name of one person you will reach out to for help.

#### NAME & HOW THIS PERSON CAN HELP

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**WHAT** activities help you restore your peace of mind? Make a list of these activities and place a star next to the one **NEW** activity you will practice the next time you are feeling stressed.

#### ACTIVITY

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**Check your knowledge about caregiver stress and support:**

- Now that you have completed this section, you can check your knowledge about caregiver stress and support.
- After finishing the test, you can also compare your answers to your previous assessment and see how much you have learned.
- Answers are provided at the end of this section.

**Directions:** Please select the answer (True or False) which you believe to be correct.

	True	False
5. Good caregivers always place the patient's needs above their own needs.	T	F
6. Caregiver stress is experienced by the majority of people caring for loved ones with cancer.	T	F
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9. Feeling stressed is a sign that you are not a good caregiver.	T	F



**Directions:** Compare your test answers to the correct answers listed below.

1. F
2. T
3. T
4. T
5. F