Caregiver Stress with Dementia Patients and Coping Techniques

1.67 Contact Hours

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OBJECTIVES

After reading Caregiver Stress with Dementia Patients, the reader will be able to:

- State how stress affects the body and mind.
- Identify several causes of stressors associated with dementia patients.
- Apply basic coping techniques to dissipate stress.

AUDIENCE

This course is designed for professional caregivers who come in contact with person with a form of dementia on a daily basis, whether at home, hospitals, long-term care communities, and other settings.

INTRODUCTION

A professional caregiver is often called upon to perform many tasks and complete many duties in a timely, compassionate, and caring manner. In spite of their best efforts to maintain balance and harmony in working with dementia patients, stressful situations will occur. Some of these occasions will happen spontaneously; others, upon hindsight, may have been easily preventable. In any case, the reactions and subsequent actions by the caregiver to the stress stimuli will impact the personal and professional relationship between the caregiver and the patient. Within this module, the caregiver will learn how stress affects the body and mind; causes of stress for the dementia patient; and coping techniques that can be used by the caregiver to combat accumulated stress.
**Stress and Physical Problems**

We know stress can create havoc in our lives and contribute to a variety of physical illnesses. Symptoms of stress can include nervousness, irritation, tension, anxiety, and fear. There is research to show that people with excessive stress can be up to ten times more likely to develop middle age memory decline, and this may even contribute to the onset of Alzheimer’s. Physically, stress may be the catalyst to a number of ailments. Migraine headaches, whether frontal-temporal or occipital in nature, have beginnings in the inability to cope with stressful situations. Digestive issues such as reflux, heartburn, “sour stomach,” and even constipation can be aftereffects of continuing stress. Stress can even cause the heart to go into abnormal rhythm. In most cases of chronic stress, there is an increase in hormones that changes the metabolic rate causing the body to store more fat.

**Stress and Brain Health**

Stress also has profound effects on the brain. Stress on the brain may lead to anxiety and grief, and could develop into depression. Depression from stress can make you look, think, and feel older than your age. Chronic stress could lead to a diminishment in the part of the brain that helps convert short term memories into long term memories. Researchers have found that stress from modern lifestyle causes a shift in the balance of the brain, which can disrupt our ability to solve complex problems and think with clarity. Studies have also shown that high levels of stress release excessive amounts of cortisol, and there is evidence that too much cortisol can impair memory. And finally, a study of electrical activity in the brain during an acute stressful situation finds that the brain shifts from logical thought processing to a more emotional response. We react quickly and with less thought, and we often have trouble making reasonable decisions.

**Four Areas of Concern**

For the professional caregiver, working with a dementia patient can present unique and challenging opportunities in which unanticipated actions or reactions can cause stress. Whether in a home setting or a care community, the caregiver must be cognizant of situations that would induce a stressful reaction from the dementia patient/resident. Four areas of concern that appear to trigger the most stressful reactions are:

- Behavioral
- Environmental
- Communication
- Sexual expression
REPETITION

Although behavioral expressions are wide and varied, we will concentrate on three areas. The first is repetition. It is not uncommon for a dementia patient to repeat the same question twelve times within a five minute span. It becomes frustrating to both the patient and caregiver, as the patient does not realize that an answer may have been provided (and forgotten), but the caregiver becomes agitated by the repetition. It is an exercise in patience, but the caregiver must guard against lashing out at the patient. A second area of concern is wandering or “sundowning.” Sundowning is a state of increased agitation, activity, and negative behaviors which occurs late in the day and continues into the evening, sometimes into the early morning hours. A patient that wonders may do so because of their inability to express themselves due to a stressful situation. In either case, there are methods to alleviate these situations. Insure the patient is well rested; a nap or quiet time will help regulate their schedule. Limit activities to morning hours, to include trips, doctor visits, and so on. A dementia patient can take only so much stimulation. Reduce or eliminate TV time, loud noises, children, and excessive quick movements. And lastly, identify any areas of physical discomfort, which may include feeling too hot or too cold, being wet, or having hunger.

IS THE ENVIRONMENT CAUSING STRESS?

Environmental/living conditions can be an unintended stress inducing situation. If a patient is cared for at home, temperature changes, too much background noise (TV, children), poor lighting, and even the routine of daily household chores can make the person with dementia frightened and withdrawn, leading to stress which may result in emotional/temperamental outburst. When a person with dementia is moved into a care community, additional stressors are placed upon them. There is a new room, unfamiliar roommate, perhaps a lack of familiar photos or furniture, new people entering and leaving the room, a new way to consume meals, and additional strangers in an unfamiliar building. A dementia patient may lash out by accusing staff or residents of stealing; rummaging or hoarding; constant exit seeking; and even stating that “I want to go home.” It should be pointed out that in these cases, going home does not refer to an actual physical residence, but a place where they used to be in their own mind. I want to be like I used to be. Environmental stressors may also be alleviated by using the Five R’s Approach: Remain calm, Respond to feelings, Reassure the person, Remove yourself if necessary, and Return later to follow up.

The Five R’s
1. Remain calm
2. Respond
3. Reassure
4. Remove yourself
5. Return later
COMMUNICATION IS KEY

A lack of clear, concise communication between the patient and caregiver may be the most frustrating and challenging form of dealing with patient stress. Due to the steady progression of the disease, what was thought to be easy and manageable last week has now turned into mental anguish this week. Because the decline in the disease process is not physically noticeable (in a manner such as weight loss or the spread of an infection), the caregiver must guard against the presumption that “he/she could do that last week” or “it’s all just an act to get attention or make us feel sorry for her.” A patient with aphasia (the inability to understand written or spoken words) will attempt to communicate the only way they know how; this could be by pointing, grunting, or the use of mixed up sentences (“I want to sleep on the box”).

In some cases where English was not their primary language as a child, they often revert back to their native tongue. By failing to communicate their wishes and a lack of caregiver understanding what the patient wants, often the patient expresses frustration and stress by hitting, yelling, or other emotional outbursts.

NEVER ARGUE

To aid the patient in overcoming communication stress, the caregiver should never argue. Repeat instructions and show them what you would like them to do. Do this as many times as necessary, taking time to directly face the patient without invading their “personal space.” Address the person by name to help keep them focused. Non-verbal cues such as smiling, soft gentle touch, being non-threatening and treating them with dignity and respect does much to help defuse a possible volatile situation. When you look angry or mad, the patient will always think they caused the problem and the situation can get worse very quickly. Always reassure and smile; this means everyone is happy and there are no worries.

SEXUAL EXPRESSIONS

A fourth and often overlooked area of stress for dementia patients is that of sexuality. Even though the patient may have a mentally degenerative disease, they are still a sexual being, and still possess physical desires, which may be as innocent as hand holding, and can progress all the way to attempting to engage in sexual intercourse. The inability to fulfill these physical desires can cause frustration in both men and women. Men especially will be more prone to act on their desires, which may include fondling or groping women, exhibitionism, and even public masturbation. Because of the disease process, either gender may mentally return to a time when they were much younger, and attempt to act out on desires, whether real or perceived. For the caregiver dealing with a patient’s sexual stress, the balance is to deal with the patient in a dignified, non-judgmental manner while protecting the patient and others from physical harm. A simple, direct admonishment may be sufficient. In other cases, assist the offending party in getting dressed, all the while gently talking and diverting their attention. Redirection to a new, safe activity can end a possible problem. For any patient in a care community, the caregiver should always be aware of community policies and procedures and any state requirements for reporting such incidents.
STRESS REDUCTION AND COPING TECHNIQUES

For the professional caregiver, it is essential to maintain optimum physical, mental, and emotional health. Consistency and awareness in following daily routines will make a difference for your self-care. We have identified four areas in which caregivers can practice active stress reduction techniques:

- Better and regular sleep
- Proper eating habits
- Physical and mental activities
- Personal relaxation techniques

IMPROVED SLEEP

Your body needs sleep in order to repair and restore itself from daily activities. Sleep experts advise all adults to get seven to eight hours of sleep per night. Too little sleep results in mood changes, poor judgment, and possibly dangerous situations. Routine is the key to sleep. In order to prepare for sleep, get up and go to bed at the same times every day, including weekends and holidays. Remove distractions from the bedroom such as smart phones, computers, and TV’s. Ideally, the bedroom should be only for sleeping and intimacy.

CHOOSING HEALTHY FOODS

We are what we eat. We are aware of the dangers of a diet with too much salt, too much sugar, high fat foods, processed foods, and so on. To get healthy and stay healthy, one must eat healthy. On way too many occasions, the caregiver will sacrifice proper nutrition for expediency. It’s too easy to go through the drive-thru or to have something that comes out of a microwave bag that you pop in three minutes for dinner. Forty percent of the body’s nutritional needs are required by the brain. Failure to provide your brain proper nutrition could result in poor job performance and a decline in physical skills. It has been shown that a Mediterranean type diet using plant based foods, healthy fats, limited meat and dairy and using herbs can help a person avoid many chronic diseases. An easy way to remember to get good nutrition is to “eat your rainbow.” Every day, eat something red, something green, orange, yellow, purple, and so on. The more varieties of foods, the greater the prospect of receiving the vitamins, minerals, and nutrients needed to function at an optimum capacity.

PHYSICAL AND MENTAL ACTIVITY

A third area of caregiver stress reduction is through exercise, both physical and mental. We are continually bombarded with reports as to the obesity epidemic in this country. Just like any medical condition such as heart disease, too much weight causes your body to work harder to deliver nutrients to your brain. There are numerous forms of exercise in which an individual may participate that can result in better physical condition. Physicians recommend thirty minutes a day of moderate exercise to lower blood pressure, improve circulation, dissipate anger, and aid in weight reduction. But physical exercise is only one part of the equation. The brain needs exercise as well. Exercise for the brain is as important as exercise for the body. It is imperative that a caregiver not only keep up their current mental skills, but also
challenge themselves with new thoughts and ideas to improve the skills they already possess. Activities to reduce stress can include word games such as crossword puzzles, exploring memory assisting websites such as www.lumosity.com or www.fitbrains.com, and using memory aids.

**DEVELOP NEW SKILLS**

Developing new skills for stress reduction could be things such as engaging in new hobbies, learning a new language, or even volunteer work. Together with physical exercise, brain exercise can assist in keeping the memory sharp and reduce the possibility of overreactions to stressors. Can you make phone calls for non-profit agencies? Do you have a pet that would be great for a “pet therapy” program? Can you quilt or assist a person who does not have computer skills? There are so many ways to volunteer your talents - find one that makes you smile!

**RELAXATION – IS THIS POSSIBLE?**

How does a person relax? Many professional caregivers fall into the trap of thinking that no one else can do the job as well as me, and suffer as a result. There are a myriad of activities a caregiver can do to relax. One is a simple breathing exercise: sitting comfortably, slowly inhale making a conscious effort to expand the diaphragm, then slowly exhale through the nose. Concentrate on the sound of your breathing. Deliberate, rhythmic movements help to reduce blood pressure and calm the nervous system. Another form of relaxation is meditation. Remove all sources of background noise, wear comfortable clothes, and allow your mind the chance to relax and heal from within. Tai chi and yoga, with their structured forms and graceful movements, can also be a great form of physical stress relief. But stress relief can also be found in activities which you find to be enjoyable. A day with the girls (or guys), a concert, attending a movie, shopping, or spending time outdoors can all be effective in stress reduction. But none of these techniques will be useful unless you take the time to use them. One caregiver found that the only place she could get “away” for a few minutes was in her parked car. She did some deep relaxation techniques in the front seat and it gave her a few minutes of greatly needed respite from her duties.

**DE-STRESSING BENEFITS EVERYONE**

For the professional caregiver, stress reduction is critical to optimum job performance. The daily stressors of life, combined with those of working with dementia patients, can present challenges to even the most experienced of caregivers. By identifying how stress affects the body, a caregiver can adjust lifestyles and implement strategies to significantly reduce the impact of a stressful situation. With understanding of what things stress a dementia patient, caregivers can be prepared, both physically and mentally, for daily functions. By practicing stress reduction techniques in relation to sleeping, eating, exercise, and relaxation, the caregiver can help ensure an optimal work performance and beneficial caregiver/patient interaction.
REFERENCES AND RESOURCES


1) People with excessive stress may be up to _____ times more likely to develop middle age memory decline.

A. 3  
B. 7  
C. 10  
D. 20

2) In cases of chronic stress, an increase in hormones may cause the body to:

A. Lose weight  
B. Store fat  
C. Develop hearing loss  
D. Retain water weight

3) Chronic stress in the brain could lead to a diminishment in the part of the brain that:

A. Converts short-term memory into long-term memory  
B. Regulates heartbeat and breathing  
C. Controls appetite  
D. Affects moral judgments

4) Sundowning is:

A. Sleeping all day and staying awake all night  
B. Engaging in disruptive activities after midnight  
C. Fixation on watching sunsets  
D. A state of increased agitation which occurs late in the day

5) When a dementia patient under stress says “I want to go home,” they really mean:

A. They are longing for a treasured childhood home.  
B. They want to go to a place where they used to be in their mind.  
C. They want to return to independent living.  
D. They are merely acting out to get attention.
6) Which is not part of the Five R’s approach?
   A. Remain calm
   B. Remove yourself if necessary
   C. Reinforce the person’s anger
   D. Respond to feelings

7) A patient with aphasia cannot:
   A. Understand written or spoken words
   B. Speak English
   C. Communicate with hand signals
   D. Respond in complete sentences

8) How might men with dementia express their sexual stress?
   A. Groping and fondling women
   B. Exhibitionism
   C. Public masturbation
   D. All of the above

9) An easy way for caregivers to remember to get good nutrition is:
   A. Color your rainbow
   B. Eat your rainbow
   C. Meditate upon rainbows
   D. Chase a rainbow

10) Physical exercise can help caregivers in all of the following areas except:
    A. Lower blood pressure
    B. Dissipate anger
    C. Improve sexual stamina
    D. Aid in weight reduction
CE Exam

Caregiver Stress with Dementia Patients

Your opinion is important to us. Please answer the following questions by circling the response that best represents your experience.

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<th>COURSE OBJECTIVES &amp; CONTENT</th>
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<td>1.   The activity was valuable in helping me achieve the stated learning objectives.</td>
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<td>2.   The content was up to date.</td>
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<th>TEACHING/LEARNING METHODS</th>
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<td>4.   The teaching/learning methods, strategies, and slides were effective in helping me learn.</td>
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<td>6.   The answers to the post-test questions were appropriately covered in the activity.</td>
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<th>OVERALL ACTIVITY</th>
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<td>7.   The online course/download supported the achievement of the stated learning objectives.</td>
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<td>8.   The material was relevant to my professional development.</td>
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<td>9.   Overall, I am pleased with this activity and would recommend it to others.</td>
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<td>10.  The content was presented free of commercial bias. *</td>
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<td>11.  Did the material presented increase your knowledge and/or understanding of this topic? *</td>
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* If you responded “No” to question 10, please explain why:

_________________________________________________________________________
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* If you answered “Yes” to question 11, what change do you intend to make?
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What barrier, if any, may prevent you from implementing what you learned?
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Cite one new piece of information you learned from this activity:
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Additional comments/suggestions:
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With my signature I confirm that I am the person who completed this independent educational activity by reading the material and completing this self evaluation.

Signature _________________________________ Date: ___________________________
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Have you registered with us before? _____ Yes _____ No

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