

An Overview of Men as Informal Caregivers

Traditionally, women have been the primary caregivers to family members who require in-home care due to age or disability. However, the number of male caregivers has increased in recent years. The 2009 California Health Interview Survey reports that over 2.6 million California men are “informal caregivers,” providing care for loved ones who suffer from long-term disability or illness. An estimated 43.4 percent of California’s informal caregivers are men.¹ This Short Subject discusses a few distinct features of male informal caregivers, including physical and emotional stress, perceived burden, identity and the role of social networks.

PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL STRESS

The stress of caregiving has been shown to contribute to physical and psychological problems for men. The National Alliance for Caregiving (NAC) found that 25 percent of male caregivers reported high levels of emotional stress associated with caregiving, and 11 percent reported a high degree of physical strain. Twelve percent reported overall declining health associated with their duties.²

The risk of stroke and coronary heart disease is a danger to male caregivers. In a 2010 survey by the American Heart Association (AHA) of white and African American caregivers, men were asked how much of a mental or emotional strain they experienced as the care provider to a family member with a disability. Among white male caregivers, 14 percent reported a lot of strain, while 47 percent reported some strain. Among African American male caregivers, 12 percent reported a lot of mental and emotional strain, while 43 percent reported some strain. The AHA survey found that men who had assumed the role of caregiver to a spouse and who also reported high levels of mental and emotional strain, had significantly elevated stroke risk compared with male caregivers reporting no strain at all. This was particularly true of African American male caregivers.³

Men experience burdens and depression associated with caregiving, which sometimes varies from the experience of women. A 2002 study compared the perceived burden levels and depression levels of male and female relatives who minister to older dementia patients. Caregivers were asked questions to determine perceived levels of burden on their health, finances, social life, and interpersonal relationships. Significantly more female caregivers (27.2%) had a high burden score than male caregivers (14.5%).

Fast Facts

Source: National Alliance for Caregiving, 2009

- In 1997, 27 percent of all informal caregivers in the United States were men; by 2009, that number had risen to 34 percent.
- Most male caregivers in the United States (40 percent) have primary responsibility for adults age 18-49. One third (33 percent) of male caregivers look after adults age 50 and older, while 28 percent look after children under age 18.
- The average male caregiver is 46.6 years old.

The authors had two theories about this gender difference in perceived burden. The first was that men have different coping strategies, and thus may not find certain situations burdensome, compared to women. The second theory was that women, more often than men, tend to feel they have been thrust into the caregiving role reluctantly, or that they feel ill-equipped for the job.³ In fact, the NAC survey corroborated this idea: more women (45%) than men (38%) reported that they felt they did not have a choice in taking on the caregiver role.² It may be that because men feel they have more of a choice whether to become caregivers, they consider their responsibilities less burdensome.

In a 1999 study, male caregivers were asked open-ended questions about the burden of caring for loved ones who had mental disabilities. All of the respondents described experiencing emotional strain.

Many expressed their means of coping in terms of staying on top of the job, and striving to be realistic and action-oriented in response to their feelings.

The financial impact of caregiving was also identified by male caregivers as a source of stress. Home care can be expensive, and caregivers sometimes find that personal income is gradually depleted in the care of ill relatives. Stress arises, particularly in men, from what one respondent called a "relentless sense of responsibility" over finances.⁴

SOCIAL NETWORKS

Studies suggest that the workplace, besides providing a source of income, is a meaningful source of social interaction for men, one that helps them cope emotionally with caregiving. NAC reports that 82 percent of men are employed while acting as informal caregivers, compared to 69 percent of women.² In a 2004 study, 30 male caregivers were interviewed about their social networks. For the respondents, it was clear that social networks were beneficial in lessening caregiver burdens. Even when a paycheck was not necessary, some men purposefully retained their jobs, even part time, for the benefit of belonging to a community. Retired men interviewed in this survey expressed loneliness and feelings of isolation without social interaction associated with work.⁵

The Internet provides another means of social interaction and help. Among male caregivers, 32 percent use the Internet as a caregiving information resource.² A recent Pew Research study reported that 43 percent of male caregivers used the Internet to diagnose a condition, compared to 22 percent of men who are noncaregivers.⁶

IDENTITY

In 2007, researchers interviewed 17 men whose wives were afflicted with some form of progressive dementia. These men were asked to describe their perceptions of their roles as informal caregivers. They identified several key themes in their roles, including:

Protection – Some husbands described the obligation they felt to preserve the dignity of their wives in day-to-day care.

Sense of duty – Many felt the obligation to be loyal and to uphold the marriage vows, though the responsibilities and levels of care had changed.

Pride – Some husbands expressed a clear sense of satisfaction derived from fulfilling an important role in their wives' healthcare.

Love – Many husbands noted a change for the better in their relationships to include a new form of intimacy or closeness.⁷

DISCUSSION

As the Baby Boomer generation ages, informal caregivers will become more important than ever to those who suffer from disability or illness. In addition, certain diseases strike women more often than men. The National Multiple Sclerosis Society reports that women are diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis two to three times more often than men.⁸ Nearly two-thirds of Americans with Alzheimer's disease are women.⁹ Male caregivers will continue to serve a crucial role among loved ones suffering from illness or disability.

ENDNOTES

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8. Data from the National MS Society:
<http://www.nationalmssociety.org/Research/Research-We-Fund/Past-Research-Efforts>
9. Data from the Alzheimer's Association:
http://www.alz.org/downloads/facts_figures_2014.pdf

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