

Family Caregiving

Over 50 million caregivers in the United States provide the equivalent of \$470 billion in unpaid assistance (AARP Public Policy Institute, 2020). Many people do things for family and/or friends; what makes someone a caregiver? People become a caregiver or care partner when they regularly help someone in ways that are different from what is typical in that type of relationship. Examples include shopping and/or cooking for someone who can no longer do this on their own, routinely taking this person to their medical appointments, or helping them remember what they need to do in daily life. Sometimes people become a caregiver when another person is diagnosed with a medical illness, including a mental health disorder. Others become a caregiver gradually as problems get worse over time, or when someone else with primary responsibilities is no longer able to continue. Individuals can become a caregiver at any point in their adult life and may be a caregiver of a spouse or romantic partner, a parent or grandparent, a disabled adult child, a grandchild, or another “chosen” family member. “Chosen family” are individuals who, although not tied by blood or marriage, are in very close interconnected relationships.

Benefits and Costs of Providing Care

Caregiving has benefits. Research has shown that, despite popular belief, most caregivers live longer than individuals who are not involved in providing care to another person. Supporting another person can bring a deep sense of meaning and purpose in life. Those receiving care may continue to do some things for the care partner and for themselves. People commonly develop new skills in their caregiving role that continue to be useful in other life situations. It is also the case that caregiving responsibilities and tasks can overwhelm emotional, physical, and financial resources and be extremely stressful. Caregiving costs and benefits can vary depending upon other aspects of identity and cultural diversity (e.g., ethnic and racial background, LGBT+, rural versus urban residence) and the type of caregiving. Caring for someone with serious mental illness or cognitive disabilities due to brain injury or a disease, such as Alzheimer’s, is especially stressful. Some caregivers experience depression and anxiety; many individuals neglect important aspects of their own physical and mental health.

Supports for Caregivers

No one should attempt to be a caregiver without getting support for themselves. To remain able to provide care, all caregivers need help. Information, access to community resources, practical assistance with daily life tasks, time away from caregiving (called “respite”), and emotional support can all be critically important. Learning new coping strategies and some useful communication skills can reduce stress and burden. Some caregivers meet with a therapist for time-limited psychotherapy to develop and apply healthy coping and communication skills. Others attend caregiving programs in the community that provide education, support, and opportunities to develop and practice new skills.

CBT Can Help Caregivers to:

- Pay attention to, and give themselves credit for, what is going well
- Identify and arrange for additional resources and supports
- Use healthy coping skills during particularly stressful times
- Engage in positive activities for themselves and with the person receiving care
- Develop effective ways to communicate with others (e.g., family, medical providers)

What Is Cognitive Behavior Therapy?

Behavior Therapy and Cognitive Behavior Therapy are types of treatment that are based firmly on research findings. These approaches aid people in achieving specific changes or goals. Changes or goals might involve:

A way of acting: controlling salt or alcohol intake, taking medications as prescribed;

A way of feeling: helping a person manage stress;

A way of thinking: understanding that diet and exercise affect blood pressure;

A way of dealing with physical or medical

problems: using behavioral techniques to control diet;

A way of coping: learning to take an active role in one’s own health

Behavior Therapists and Cognitive Behavior Therapists usually focus more on the current situation and its solution, rather than the past. They concentrate on a person’s views and beliefs about their life, not on personality traits. Behavior Therapists and Cognitive Behavior Therapists treat individuals, parents, children, couples, and families. Replacing ways of living that do not work well with ways of living that work, and giving people more control over their lives, are common goals of behavior and cognitive behavior therapy.

National Resources in the U.S.

- National Institute on Aging (1-800-222-2225)
www.nia.nih.gov/health/caregiving
- National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI; 1-703-524-7600)
www.nami.org
- National Center on Caregiving (1-800-445-8107)
www.caregiver.org/national-center-caregiving
- AARP Caregiving Support (1-888-687-2277)
www.aarp.org/caregiving
- Alzheimer's Association (1-800-272-3900; 24/7 helpline)
www.alz.org
- U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs: Caregiver Support
(1-855-260-3274)
www.caregiver.va.gov

How to Get Help

If you are looking for help, either for yourself or someone else, you may be tempted to call someone who advertises in a local publication or who comes up from a search of the Internet. You may, or may not, find a competent therapist in this manner. It is wise to check on the credentials of a psychotherapist. It is expected that competent therapists hold advanced academic degrees. They should be listed as members of professional organizations, such as the Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies or the American Psychological Association. Of course, they should be licensed to practice in your state. You can find competent specialists who are affiliated with local universities or mental health facilities or who are listed on the websites of professional organizations. You may, of course, visit our website (www.abct.org) and click on "Find a CBT Therapist"

Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies (ABCT) is an interdisciplinary organization committed to the advancement of a scientific approach to the understanding and amelioration of problems of the human condition. These aims are achieved through the investigation and application of behavioral, cognitive, and other evidence-based principles to assessment, prevention, and treatment.
www.abct.org