



Day care services facilitate caregivers' wellbeing

Caregiving is a stressful experience, but when it comes to dementia caregiving, the stress could become more intense. Research has shown that caregivers of people with dementia engage in a greater intensity of work and face more problems. The high caregiving hours and degree of daily activity assistance are reported to associate directly with stress ¹.

The effect of chronic stress extends beyond psychology to physical wellbeing. Studies have related dementia caregiving to heart disease risk², wound healing performance³, and other immune functions. For example, a study comparing 49 spousal caregivers of persons with dementia and 67 healthy non-caregivers of the same age reported a lower cell-mediated immunity and an elevated level of salivary cortisol, a stress indicator, among dementia caregivers ⁴.

Interventions targeting dementia caregivers, such as psychological interventions, have reported success in mediating stress levels. Services targeting the people with dementia have also yielded beneficiary effects on the caregivers. It was suggested that by restructuring the weekly schedule of the people with dementia, caregivers might regain time to handle necessary demands that could not be otherwise done with the home-bounding care recipients, and hence reduce stress level ⁵. Follow up studies have further elaborated the benefits of daycare services on caregiver stress.

One study investigated the association between the day care use of individuals with dementia, frequency of behavioral symptoms of dementia as reported by the caregivers, and stress level of the caregivers. Caregivers of people with dementia were interviewed three times since the care recipient first received adult daycare service (ADS). Changes across two months included reduced stress exposure and stress level, but a reduction in behavioral symptoms was also reported in the evenings of ADS days, indicating that the activities provided in ADS had sustained effects that continued to calm people with dementia after they returned home ⁶.

In another study, comparisons of caregiver stress level were made between normal days and days that the care recipients received ADS, on which caregivers were freed from caregiving duties. 173 dementia caregivers whose relatives attended ADS at least twice per week were interviewed on eight consecutive days. Results showed that ADS influenced depressive affects and anger level of caregivers to daily stressors. On ADS days, caregivers reacted to non-care related stimulants with less intensity of depressive affects, a reaction described by the authors as a buffer effect created by ADS. Although non-care related stressors were



reported to occur more frequently on such days, caregivers were able to cope with the said stressors more effectively. Also on ADS days, caregivers demonstrated significantly less anger⁷. A further analysis of 158 dementia caregivers' saliva samples suggested that ADS lowered cortisol level and helped recover impaired diurnal cortisol patterns⁸. These changes in reactions to stressors, regardless of the nature, suggested that a break from the original caregiving routine allowed caregivers to recover from the prolonged stress and cope with resuming caregiving tasks better after the break.

Other than the effects from relinquishing caregiving hours, ADS, in particularly dementia-specific day care, was reported to have a certain effect on maintaining cognitive and psychological wellbeing of people with dementia, and to relief caregivers' burden with sustainable effect. In a local study involving 39 dementia day care service users and their caregivers, the self-reported burden of caregivers significantly decreased a year after their relative received day care services, while the cognitive scores and the quality of life of the people with dementia were maintained throughout the year⁹.

Adult day care has, thus far, shown favorable effects for dementia caregivers. The reduction in stress has shown promise in both self-reported and biological benchmarks, and the effect of ADS has also extended beyond the hours of service. Thus apart from people with dementia, stressed family caregivers could be the beneficiaries of day care services as well.



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