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Web Exclusive: Caregivers Often Neglect Their Mental Health

BY THE AMERICAN CANCER SOCIETY

It's common knowledge that people caring for a loved one with cancer will often neglect their own physical well-being—forgetting to eat, losing sleep, skipping exercise. New evidence shows they may also neglect their mental health.

The researchers interviewed the caregivers about their mental health, using questions based on a standard psychiatric diagnostic manual. The questions were designed to identify major depressive disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, and panic disorder. Caregivers also were asked whether they had discussed their mental health with a health care provider or sought treatment for a mental health concern.

Twenty-six (13 percent) of the caregivers met the diagnostic criteria for one or more of those psychiatric disorders. Twenty-one of those 26 (80.8 percent) said they had discussed a mental health concern with a healthcare provider before their loved one was diagnosed with cancer, but only 12 of them (46.2 percent) had sought professional help with their mental health after their loved one's diagnosis.

“These caregivers are experiencing a clinically significant level of distress,” said study co-author Holly Prigerson, PhD, director of the Center for Psycho-oncology and Palliative Care Research at Dana-Farber. “Yet they seem to be neglecting their own mental health needs, quite possibly due to the lack of time, energy, or financial resources associated with caregiving.”

Previous research has shown that many caregivers experience significant psychological distress because of caring for a loved one with advanced cancer, but Dr. Prigerson's study is one of only a few to use actual diagnostic criteria to identify psychiatric illness. “This study actually assigned a diagnosis, which is something that can be treated,” said Bonnie Teschendorf, PhD, director of Quality of Life Science for the American Cancer Society.

The most common disorder among the caregivers was panic disorder, which affected 16 people (8 percent). Only about 3 percent of the general population exhibits this disorder, according to the study authors, so the finding suggests caregivers may be more at risk than others of developing this problem.

Dr. Prigerson and her colleagues said oncologists and other “front-line” health professionals could be a bridge for caregivers to get the mental health help they need, because they interact with caregivers on a regular basis. “The oncology team is in the ideal position to initiate such discussions and guide the caregiver

toward the appropriate resources to help them deal with the stress of caregiving,” Dr. Prigerson said.

For more information on issues of cancer treatment, including home or hospice care, and transportation, visit the [American Cancer Society's](#) website.

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