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CARING FOR CAREGIVERS OF THE CHRONICALLY CRITICALLY ILL

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According to the National Alliance for Caregiving,¹ in any given year more than 65 million people provide care for a chronically ill, disabled, or aged family member or friend. The caregiver burden must be considered when planning discharge to home for a chronically critically ill patient. All members of the interdisciplinary team can be instrumental in providing support for these caregivers in the transition to home.

We know there is a high incidence of depression in caregivers of the chronically critically ill, and the caregiver burden is as much emotional as physical. We also know that lifestyle restrictions of the caregiver in personal and social areas may diminish over time, depending on a patient's functional status. However, a patient's physical and psychological problem behaviors can continue over time.

Here's what you can do:

- Encourage the health care staff on your unit to attend to their own physical and psychological well-being.
- Make use of resources (employee assistance programs, chaplains, social workers) available to staff when stress debriefing is needed.
- Assess family members' and other care providers' attention to personal health and well-being.
- Reassure family members and other care providers that what they are feeling is normal and that resources are available to help them.
- Confer with social workers and case management workers to find support mechanisms for the patient and caregivers after discharge.
- Send documentation regarding caregiver learning and emotional needs to any home care services that may interact with the patient and caregiver.



Illustration by Birck Cox

Other helpful resources:

- AACN *Protocols for Practice: Creating Healing Environments*, 2nd ed. <http://www.aacn.org/HealingEnvironmentsProduct>.
- Weinstein S, ed. *B Is for Balance: A Nurses Guide for Enjoying Life at Work and Home*. Indianapolis, Indiana: Sigma Theta Tau International; 2009. Available at AACN Bookstore.
- CareCalendar: Bringing Communities Together to Care for Loved Ones. <http://www.carecalendar.org>.

REFERENCE

1. National Family Caregivers Association. Who are family caregivers? http://www.thefamilycaregiver.org/who_are_family_caregivers/care_giving_statistics.cfm. Accessed November 29, 2010.

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