



# RESCUE

Resources & Education for Stroke Caregivers'  
Understanding & Empowerment

June 2009

[www.rorc.research.va.gov/rescue](http://www.rorc.research.va.gov/rescue)

## STRESS MANAGEMENT FOR STROKE CAREGIVERS



Taking on the role of a caregiver can be difficult and stressful. Caregivers often feel overwhelmed with caring for their loved one and they may pay less attention to their own health. This can create problems further down the line. Caregivers need to take care of themselves, especially when it comes to dealing with stress. Ignoring stress is the main cause of caregiver burn out.

Stress can weaken the immune system and result in physical and emotional problems. It can manifest in different forms such as physical pains, decreased energy levels, negative emotional feelings or moods — all of which can negatively affect your health. Stress combined with lack of attention to personal well-being can lead to severe health consequences if left untreated. It may even increase the caregiver's risk for stroke.

### Areas Affected by Stress and Common Responses

#### Aches and Pains

- Headache
- Backache
- Neck ache
- Stomach ache
- Tight muscles
- Clenched jaw

#### Energy Level and Sleep

- Feeling tired without a good reason
- Trouble sleeping

#### Feelings

- Anxiety
- Anger
- Depression
- Helplessness
- Out of control
- Tense

#### Other Emotional Signs

- Easily irritated
- Impatient
- Forgetful

Everyone experiences stress but reacts differently. The RESCUE Team is developing a helpful fact sheet called "**Caregiver Stress and Depression**" to assist stroke caregivers in managing their stress. Here are some of the tips from the fact sheet:

- Accept your feelings. Feelings of anger and sadness are normal from time to time. Be patient with yourself.
- Remember that caregiving has rewards. About half of all caregivers report positive feelings about caregiving. Caregiving often leads to stronger relationships with loved ones. Many stroke survivors do not show their true feelings. But, know that your loved one needs and appreciates your care.
- Don't take things personally. Your loved one may say or do hurtful things. Remember that these behaviors are due to his or her illness and own frustration.
- Practice getting rid of negative thoughts. Replace negative thoughts with positive thinking or memories. Practice this every day. Focus on the things you can do. Relax about those things that you cannot. Forget and forgive your mistakes. We all make them.
- Get information. Learn about strokes, resources, and ways to provide good care. This will help you plan for the future.

## AHA/ASA TIPS FOR MANAGING STRESS

The American Stroke Association/American Heart Association (ASA/AHA), a partner of the RESCUE campaign, addresses caregiver stress in their publication "How Can I Manage Stress." Stroke caregiver stress can result from uncontrollable outside events, however it is how the individual reacts to these events that is important. Below are the ASA/AHA's helpful tips for coping with stress:

- Take some time day in the day to sit quietly, breathe deeply and have peaceful images.
- Try to learn to accept things you can't change.
- Look at the good side of things rather than the bad, by talking yourself out of it.
- Engage in physical activity regularly, by doing something that you enjoy (walk, swim, ride a bike).
- Feel free to ask others for help, just to talk with someone about what you need.
- Limit alcohol, don't overeat, and don't smoke.

To download "How Can I Manage Stress" visit: <http://www.americanheart.org/presenter.jhtml?identifier=3007448>





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## MEASURING STRESS

In order to deal with stress, it is important to understand the level of stress being experienced. The RESCUE fact sheet, “**Caregiver Stress and Depression**” includes a modified Zarit scale to help stroke caregivers evaluate their stress level. It’s short and easy to complete. A score total of 8 or more means a high level of stress and the caregiver should consult their healthcare provider for help.

ZARIT SCALE		Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Quite Frequently	Nearly Always
POINTS		(0)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
1) DO YOU FEEL that because of the time you spend with the stroke survivor that you don't have enough time for yourself?						
2) DO YOU FEEL stressed between caring for the stroke survivor and trying to meet other responsibilities (work/family)?						
3) DO YOU FEEL strained when you are around the stroke survivor?						
4) DO YOU FEEL uncertain about what to do for the stroke survivor?						
		<b>Subtotals:</b>				
Based on the Zarit Caregiver Burden Scale, from Zarit SH, et al. (1980). Relatives of the impaired elderly: correlates of feelings of burden. Gerontologist, 20(6), 649-655		<b>Total Score:</b>				

Here is a simple stress test from the American Heart Association (AHA) Web site. Checking even one of the behaviors can mean that someone isn’t dealing with stress very well.

To see more information about dealing with stress, visit the American Heart Association at:  
<http://americanheart.org/presenter.jhtml?identifier=3047874>

There are also many Web-based interactive tools available to measure stress level, such as the “**Life Change Stress Test**” available on the WebMD site at:

<http://www.webmd.com/hw-popup/life-change-stress-test>.

<b>HOW DO YOU RESPOND?</b>	
✓	<i>When you are under stress, do any of these behaviors apply to you?</i>
	I eat to calm down.
	I speak and eat very fast.
	I drink alcohol or smoke to calm down.
	I rush around but do not get much done.
	I work too much.
	I delay doing the things I need to do.
	I sleep too little, too much or both.
	I slow down.
	I try to do many things at once.

## LOOKING TO THE FUTURE OF THE RESCUE PROJECT

The RESCUE Web site currently being developed (to be LIVE in 2010) will feature over 40 fact sheets (English and Spanish), organized into categories including **Getting Started, General Information About Stroke, Caregiver's Needs, Stroke Survivor's Physical Needs, Stroke Survivor's Emotional and Behavioral Needs, Independent Living Needs, and Community Resources**.

Some RESCUE Web fact sheets that deal specifically with alleviating stroke caregiver stress include:

- “[Exercise after Stroke](#)” - offers different types of exercises and their physical and mental health benefits,
- “[How stroke affects family and friends](#)” - reveals what to expect as roles change and offers helpful advice to adapt ,
- “[Changes in Communication](#)” - addresses how to deal with communication problems and provides solutions which can help in reducing stress, and
- “[Caregivers Who Work Outside the Home](#)” - helpful information for caregivers who juggle caregiving and a career while taking care of themselves amidst the stress.



## TELL US WHAT YOU THINK!

Gaining your feedback is important to the success of the RESCUE Project, and your thoughts and ideas will assist us in meeting the needs of stroke caregivers and planning for future Newsletters. Please fill out our Web-based feedback form. The estimated time to complete is less than 3 minutes, you may skip questions you prefer not to answer, and no personal identifying information will be recorded through your participation.

If you are a VA employee ONLY, with access to a VA computer, please visit:

[http://vaww.cf.webdev.va.gov/rorc/rescue/feedback\\_confirm.cfm](http://vaww.cf.webdev.va.gov/rorc/rescue/feedback_confirm.cfm)

If you receive the RESCUE Newsletter and ARE NOT a VA employee, don't worry! Your opinion is also very important! We will be distributing a separate feedback form for non-VA Newsletter recipients in the next few months. Stay tuned!

### My HealtheVet



#### IN THE SPOTLIGHT: Living With Stress

Each month My HealtheVet, [www.myhealth.va.gov](http://www.myhealth.va.gov), the award-winning Personal Health Record for Veterans, features articles addressing different health-related topics. In January of 2008, My HealtheVet's "In The Spotlight" column focused on living with stress. In this article, Dr. James Goalder shared many ways that stress can affect a person and several approaches to dealing with stress that included the body, mind, time, relationships, and spiritual life. Dr. Goalder's article closes with the helpful Serenity Prayer.

See below for the link to read the full article on the My HealtheVet Web site.

### Did You Know?

- A pilot study conducted at the VA San Diego Healthcare System found that the number of yoga sessions attended and frequency of home practice is associated with improved health outcomes for pain, depression, energy and fatigue.
- Several studies have measured the beneficial effects animals can have on people, such as stroking a dog or cat can reduce blood pressure in individuals with hypertension.
- Research shows that having a strong social support network, made up of family, friends and peers, is beneficial in dealing with stress.
- Listening to music may decrease heart rate, blood pressure and levels of anxiety.

### Links in this Issue



[RESCUE Web Site](http://www.rorc.research.va.gov/rescue)  
[VA My HealtheVet](http://www.myhealth.va.gov)  
[American Stroke Association \(ASA\)](http://www.strokeassociation.org)/  
[American Heart Association \(AHA\)](http://www.americanheart.org/presenter.jhtml?identifier=3007448)

["In the Spotlight" My HealtheVet](#)

[WebMD](#)

<http://www.rorc.research.va.gov/rescue>  
<http://www.myhealth.va.gov>  
<http://www.strokeassociation.org>  
<http://americanheart.org/presenter.jhtml?identifier=3007448>  
<http://americanheart.org/presenter.jhtml?identifier=3047874>  
[https://www.myhealth.va.gov/mhv-portal-web/anonymous.portal?nfpb=true&nfto=false&pageLabel=spotlightArchive&contentPage=spotlight/January%202008/spotlight\\_stress-management.html](https://www.myhealth.va.gov/mhv-portal-web/anonymous.portal?nfpb=true&nfto=false&pageLabel=spotlightArchive&contentPage=spotlight/January%202008/spotlight_stress-management.html)  
<http://www.webmd.com/hw-popup/life-change-stress-test>

Citations referenced in this Newsletter can be found in the Web version @ <http://www.rorc.research.va.gov/rescue>



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Web-Based Informational Materials for Caregivers of Veterans Post-Stroke  
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