

The Benefits of Caregiving

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Over 20% of the U.S. population cares for someone at home with a disability. There is growing concern about the harmful effects of such caregiving on the health of the caregivers themselves. The most typical scenario is the elderly wife or husband who has to take care of a disabled or ailing spouse. Certainly having a disabled adult in the home is stressful, but does actually providing the care yourself make your own health worse or shorten your life span?

To answer this question, researchers in Michigan, Pennsylvania and California examined data from a series of health surveys from 1993 to 2000, following over 3,400 persons with a disabled spouse in the home. The participants, who were typically over 70 years old, were sorted into two groups: 1) those who cared for their ailing spouses themselves, and 2) those who had someone else come into the home and look after them. The caregiver group averaged 14 hours of direct care per week. Spousal need was determined by how limited the ailing spouse was in terms of activities of daily living and was categorized as mild, moderate, or severe. Over the course of seven years 909 participants died (26.9%). Participants who lived with ill and needy spouses showed higher mortality rates than those who lived with relatively healthy spouses. However, of those with ailing spouses, the group of caregivers that had provided 14 hours per week or more of care showed the lowest mortality rate. Of 909 participants who had died, 756 (83.2%) had provided no care to their disabled partners!

The results suggest that providing care for an elderly disabled spouse may not be the biggest source of stress for the healthy spouse. Instead, just living with a disabled spouse and witnessing their declines in health and ability may be the biggest source of stress. Providing care for the disabled spouse may actually help the healthy spouse cope with the stress. There is evidence from other research that seniors who volunteer their time to help others actually live longer and have more productive lives than those who don't. Doing nothing may actually lead to feelings of helplessness and add to the stress of living with an ailing loved one. Perhaps taking some action to relieve the suffering or assist one's spouse reduces such feelings of helplessness. Or maybe providing care is a good distraction from the grief that comes with seeing a loved one in decline.

Brown S.L., Smith D.M., Schulz R., Kabeto M.U., Ubel P.A., Poulin M., Yi J., Kim C., Langa K.M. (2009). Caregiving behavior is associated with decreased mortality risk. *Psychological Science* 20, 488-494.