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MEMBER



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## UNDERSTANDING CAREGIVER STRESS

The National Care Planning Council recently published an article on caregiver stress. A 2003 study of caregivers by a research team at the Ohio State University has proven that the off-repeated adage "stress can kill you" is true. The focus of the investigation was the effect that the stress of caregiving had on caregivers. The team, led by Janice Kiecolt-Glaser, Ph.D., reports on a six-year study of elderly people caring for spouses with Alzheimer's disease. The study not only found a significant deterioration in the health of caregivers when compared to a similar group of non-caregivers, but it also found that the caregivers had a 63% higher death rate than the control group.

The demands on a caregiver result in a great deal of stress. It is often observed in publications about the elderly that stress can induce illness and depression. The resulting poor health can further decrease the effectiveness of the caregiver and in some cases, as proven by the study mentioned above, even cause premature death.

Stress can be defined as a physiological reaction to a threat. The greater the threat – the greater the level of stress. A threat is a real or perceived action against our person. Threats may include the anticipated possibility of death or injury but may also include challenges to our self-esteem, social standing or relationships to others, or a threat may simply be a potential or real disruption of our established routines. What is stressful to one person may not be to another. For example, bumper-to-bumper traffic might be stressful to the executive who is late for an important meeting, but to the delivery driver who has no deadline and is being paid by the hour, it may be a welcome respite to relax and listen to the radio.

Stress produces real physical changes. In some unknown way the fears in an individual's mind, both conscious and subconscious, cause the hypothalamus and pituitary glands, deep in the brain, to initiate a cascade of hormones and immune system proteins that temporarily alter the body. This is a normal human physiological response inherent to the human body when a threat is

perceived – real or not. It is often called the "fight-or-flight response" or the "stress response". The purpose is to give us clearer thought and increased strength as well as to activate the immune system to deal with potential injury and to repair potential wounds. When the perceived threat is removed, assuming no damage is done, the body returns to normal.

A team of researchers at the Ohio State University Medical Center has found a chemical marker in the blood that shows a significant increase under chronic stress and is linked to an impaired immune system response in aging adults. The team, led by Dr. Janice Kiecolt-Glaser, reports in the June 30, 2003, issue of Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences on a six-year study of elderly people caring for spouses with Alzheimer's Disease. With the caregivers, the team found a four-fold increase in an immune system protein – interleukin 6 (IL-6) – as compared to an identically matched control group of non-caregivers. Only the stress of caregiving correlated to the marked increase of IL-6 in the caregiver group. All other factors, including age, were not significant to the outcome. Even the younger caregivers saw an increase in IL-6.

The study also found that the caregivers had a 63% higher death rate than the control group. About 70% of the caregivers died before the end of the study and had to be replaced by new subjects. Another surprising result was that high levels of IL-6 continued even three years after the caregiving stopped. Dr. Glaser proposes the prolonged stress may have triggered a permanent abnormality of the immune system.

IL-6 is only one cytokine – an immune system mediator protein – in a cascade of endocrine hormones and cytokines that are released when the brain signals a person is threatened with harm, injury, undue mental or physical stress or death. The hormones prepare the body to react quickly by increasing heart rate, making muscles more reactive, stimulating thought, altering sugar metabolism, and producing many more changes that result in the "rush" people experience when they think they may be harmed.

The problem is if this response is initiated frequently and over a long period, then it can have a dangerous effect on the body. This constant initiation of the stress response is common among caregivers – especially those caring for loved ones with dementia. Providing supervision or physical assistance many hours a week and over a period of years turns out to be extremely stressful. This type of stress is often unrelenting, occurring day after day and week after week. And the long-term effects of this stress are more pronounced in middle-aged and older people who are precisely the group most likely offering long-term care to loved ones.

Prolonged high levels of IL-6 and the accompanying hormones and cytokines have been linked to: cardiovascular disease, type II diabetes, frequent viral infections, intestinal, stomach and colon disorders, osteoporosis, periodontal disease, various cancers and auto immune disorders such as lupus, rheumatoid arthritis and multiple sclerosis. Alzheimer's, dementia, nerve damage and mental problems are also linked to high IL-6. Wounds heal slower, vaccinations are less likely to take and recovery from infectious disease is impaired. People who have depression also have high levels of IL-6. Depression in caregivers is about eight times higher than the non-caregiving population.

This information should provide a compelling reason to eliminate or reduce the stress of caregiving. Next week's edition of the newsletter will cover some strategies to reduce caregiver stress.

The attorneys at Oast & Hook can assist clients with their long-term care and care management needs.

### **Announcement**

Oast & Hook is pleased to announce that Andrew Hook and Letha McDowell will be guest speakers at the upcoming Wealth Transfer Planning Drafting Bootcamp in Boston. It is a two day workshop dedicated to leveraging the power of InterActive LegalSuite™ (Wealth Transfer Planning and Elder Law & Special Needs Planning) to improve profitability and the delivery of legal services. To register or for more information, please visit the InterActive website at [www.ilsdocs.com/docs/ils\\_boston\\_bootcamp\\_brochure.pdf](http://www.ilsdocs.com/docs/ils_boston_bootcamp_brochure.pdf).

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