

## Part 1: What is a Caregiver?

Caregiving is a century old tradition in America and centuries old in many cultures throughout the world. According to the US Census Bureau (2007), 12 percent of the total US population is 65 years and older, and the incidence rate of elderly persons in the United States will rise dramatically due to aging of the baby boomer generation. Therefore, the rise in the number of caregivers in the United States will also dramatically increase in the near future.

Caregivers are family, friends, and neighbors who assist their loved ones that are faced with chronic illnesses and disabilities. Caregivers come from all walks of life, all age groups, as well as from diverse racial and ethnic groups. No one caregiver's experience is the same. Therefore each care plan is developed individually.

The role of caregiving in the United States is much different than from the past. Most caregivers today have their own job, family, and educational responsibilities that they must tend to while at the same time caring for a loved one. In the past caregivers were faced with taking care of loved ones who had infectious disease unlike the present in which caregivers are faced with taking care of loved ones who have progressive diseases such as Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease, multiple strokes, and other forms of dementia. These present day diseases can require years of caregiving as well as a greater involvement in the elder's ongoing medical condition.

Establishing emotional boundaries coupled with the need to take care of ones self and setting reasonable limits on caregiving and other life responsibilities is absolutely essential for caregivers. Without taking these steps, caregivers can become physically and emotionally exhausted with the end result of developing illnesses themselves. One important and major step for caregivers is to realize that they have limitations and as such they need to ask for help.

The Caregiver Alliance of Suffolk County provides caregivers with assistance by establishing service plans as well as identifying services, referrals, and resources that will best meet your individual needs. The services provided by the caregiver advisor are free to all caregivers who live or work in Suffolk County or whose elders do. In addition, caregiver advisors also make appropriate referrals as needed for home care services (personal care services and homemaking services) that assist caregivers with day-to-day household and personal care activities for their loved one. Please feel free to visit the Caregiver Alliance of Suffolk County website at <http://www.caregiveralliance.org> or call the Boston Elder Information Hotline at 617-292-6211 to learn more about services that will make a positive difference in your role as a caregiver.

Next month's featured article will focus on caregiver stress and the need for the caregiver to take care of themselves.