

Caregiver Corner

... Ideas and information for people caring for others 778-2411

What is Mental Health?

(Adapted from an article in *Family Ties* newsletter.)

Mental Health is a term that is not easy to define. It is subject to many interpretations and varies across cultures. The Surgeon General's report defines mental health as "the successful performance of mental function, resulting in productive activities, fulfilling relationships with other people, and the ability to adapt to change and cope with adversity." Mental Health generally refers to an individual's thoughts, feelings, and actions, particularly when faced with life challenges and stresses.

These characteristics are signs of good mental health:

- A zest for living -- the ability to enjoy life, laugh, and have fun.
- Resiliency -- being able to deal with life's stresses and bounce back from adversity.
- Self-realization -- participating in life to the fullest extent possible.

- Flexibility -- the ability to change, grow, and experience a range of feelings.
- A sense of balance in one's life.
- Self-confidence.
- Good self-esteem

If you feel you are not experiencing good mental health, help is available. A good place to start is with your doctor to make sure you are physically healthy. There are many counseling programs and places that offer support groups in the area. You can call the Office for Aging at 778-2411 for information on services available and/or to talk about your situation.

Caregivers' Chat

Would you like to chat with other caregivers in a friendly, informal setting? Come and share your experiences or just sit and listen. The next Caregivers' Chat will be held on Monday, October 2nd from 1-3 PM at the Stay Healthy Center, which is located in the Oakdale Mall near Sears.

Caregivers' Chat is a small informal discussion group for people who are concerned about an older friend or relative. The group is coordinated by Andrea Wright, MSW, Caregiver Services Case Manager. Topics are chosen by the members of the group. Light refreshments will be served. If you have

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questions feel free to call Andrea at 778-2411.

Caregiving Means Caring for Yourself too

(Adapted from a Kansas...PSP article written By Penny Schaffer)

The responsibility of caring for someone who has Alzheimer's disease or another type of dementia is more than a full-time job. The role, though often satisfying and rewarding, is frequently very tiring and taxing on the caregiver. Health professionals are concerned about this, as the health of the caregiver is frequently compromised while undergoing this responsibility.

Significant stress, both mental and physical, is reported by nearly all caregivers at one time or another. But the signs of stress and depression may approach so slowly that the caregivers may not be aware of how much their life has changed since taking on these duties. Recognizing their own level of fatigue, and the effects it is having on their health, is often overlooked. Sadly, they often pay a high price for this—and so does the one they are caring for.

The reality is that when caregivers fall ill, the people they are taking care of suffer, too. The health of the primary caregiver is paramount in optimizing the well-being of the person being cared for. Caregivers must make their own quality of life as important as that of the one they are caring for. Outside resources are usually needed to make this possible. An acceptable quality of life for many caregivers hinges on the opportunity to

maintain outside interests and contacts. The loss of frequent interaction with friends and involvement in hobbies and other pleasurable outlets significantly contributes to caregiver stress and depression.

However, the thought of placing a loved one in a nursing home is often foreboding. Nursing homes are thought of as places we go to die. But many are offering short-term respite care in an environment that is very positive. Using a long-term care or assisted living facility for respite allows caregivers to take trips to see their children or just get a few things done around the house, uninterrupted by caregiving duties. I have known many caregivers who have used this option while they spend a couple of weeks with their children and grandchildren or take a cruise with other senior friends. They return home refreshed and rejuvenated by being allowed to continue other aspects of their lives.

For many families, leaving a loved one overnight in a nursing facility is more change than they are ready to cope with. For these folks, the option of adult day care may fit their needs perfectly. These organizations provide structured activities to enhance and maintain the cognitive, functional, and social skills of persons with dementia. In many situations, spending a day or two a week in a program like this provides relief for the caregiver and improves the quality of life and functional capacity of the individual.

If you are a caregiver, don't hesitate to reach for help when you feel your inner resources growing thin. It's critical to remember that *your health—mental and*

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physical—is the most important responsibility you have. Your loved one depends on your taking care of yourself so he or she can remain at home as long as possible.

Information is your strongest ally. Isolation is your worst enemy. Help is out there. Pick up the phone and make a call. Asking for help does not mean you aren't doing a good job; you are. It doesn't mean you aren't handling things well; you probably are. It doesn't mean you're abandoning your loved one; just the opposite is true. You're taking out an insurance policy for yourself that will allow you to continue your role as caregiver for much longer. **Taking good care of yourself is the most loving thing you can do for the one you are caring for.**

Caregiver Services at the Broome County Office for Aging has information on options like overnight respite, adult day programs and support groups that can protect your mental and physical health and enable you to continue to provide good care for your loved one. We can answer your questions about any aspect of providing care to an older person. Caregiver Services can be reached at (607)778-2411.

For information specifically on caring for a person with dementia, you may call the Southern Tier Regional Office of the Central New York Chapter of the Alzheimer's Association at (607)785-7852.

Retreat Reminder

There is still time to register for "C.O.P.E. -- A Wellness Plan for Caregivers" which will be held on Thursday, November 2nd from 6-9 PM at Brothers 2 Restaurant in Endwell, New York. This event is being hosted by the

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Broome County Office for Aging and the Alzheimer's Association of Central New York, Southern Tier Regional Office.

The evening will include a buffet dinner, educational displays by area agencies and services, and dinner music provided by Donna Wood and Gene Cothran. After dinner, there will be a presentation on wellness by Staff from the Broome County Health Department. C.O.P.E. stands for Choice, Optimism, Physical Activity, and Escape.

There is no charge for this event if you are an unpaid caregiver, but contributions are appreciated. Pre-registration is by mail only. The deadline is Monday, October 23rd. You may call for information but you must register by mail. The Office for Aging number is 778-2411 and the Alzheimer's Association number is 785-7852.

Financial Benefit Programs for Seniors

When people get older, their incomes may go down, while expenses can stay the same or even increase. It can become a challenge to manage financially on a more limited income. But fortunately, there are many programs available to help seniors save money and increase their spendable income. Many people are unaware of the benefits available to them. Some of the programs have eligibility requirements and some change from year-to-year.

To help seniors and their caregivers learn about some of these benefit programs and recent changes you should know about, the

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Broome County Office for Aging will host "Financial Benefit Programs for Seniors" on Wednesday, October 11th from 6-8 PM at the Broome County Public Library on Court Street in Binghamton. Our presenters will be staff from the Office for Aging's Senior Resource Line.

Pre-registration is requested. Light refreshments will be served. Please call Andrea Wright in Caregiver Services at 778-2411 with questions or to register.

"How to Balance a Checkbook" to be offered again

Did you miss your chance to learn the skill of balancing a checkbook? If so, you now have

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another opportunity to gain confidence and mastery over this necessary chore. This seminar has been offered twice before, and is being repeated by popular demand.

"How to Balance a Checkbook" is very basic, but it gets to the heart of the matter for people who used to let their "better half" handle the bills.

It will be presented on Wednesday, October 25th from 1-3 PM at the Broome County Public Library. As in the past, our presenter will be Dick Oakley, an Office for Aging Volunteer. Pre-registration is required. Please call OFA by Monday, October 23rd.

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Your October 2006 "Caregiver Corner"