

It was only a year and a half ago that Amy Jones\* 82 year-old mom was working and driving. After she fell ill with a respiratory infection and was later diagnosed with dementia, life changed dramatically for both mother and daughter. Jones, a full-time registered nurse, had no recourse but to arrange for her mom's retirement and take away her car. And because her mother refused in-home help and her brothers live in Chicago, she became the primary caregiver.

These days, in addition to meeting the needs of her own family and those of her patients, Jones takes her mom grocery shopping three times a week, escorts her to regular doctor visits, pays her bills, organizes her pill box, and bathes her. "The greatest challenge is that my days off are

website and magazine dedicated to empowering caregivers. "There's a tremendous sense of pressure about doing it yourself. Once you enter into any caregiving situation, you owe it to the person you're caring for to take care of yourself. If you don't, who is going to take care of you?"

Indeed, caregivers often compromise their own health as they're feeding, bathing and seeing to the home safety and health care needs of their charges. The inherent stress can lead to physical exhaustion, depression and a host of illnesses. To protect your health and ease the workload, experts recommend asking for help and emphasize that it is okay to do so. Aside from reaching out to family and friends, options for assistance and support include:



## Care for the Caregiver

not my own," laments Jones, adding that she receives as many as four calls a day from her mother. "As a nurse, I understand the dynamics, but it doesn't make it any easier."

According to the National Family Caregivers Association, [www.thefamilycaregiver.org](http://www.thefamilycaregiver.org), Jones is among some 50 million Americans, most of whom are female, 40-60 years old, caring for a chronically ill, disabled or elderly, frail loved one every year. In New Jersey, there are approximately 880,000 caregivers, estimates the state's Department of Health (NJDOH). With people increasingly living longer, both national and state statistics are destined to rise, as will the already staggering financial impact on those providing care.

"We need to pay more attention to the caregiver burden, which is growing dramatically," notes Patricia Polansky, Assistant Commissioner, Division of Aging and Community Services at NJDOH, which offers self-help tools, educational guidance and a plethora of resources, broken down by county, at [www.caregivernj.com](http://www.caregivernj.com). "That burden lasts a lot longer today than it did 10 to 15 years ago."

"There's such a broad spectrum with caregiving. You're still very much a caregiver even when you have someone in a nursing home," points out Rene Cantwell, founder of Families of Loved Ones, [www.cantwellmedia.com](http://www.cantwellmedia.com), a

- **Adult daycare**, which may involve social and/or medical care, and where your loved one can go for the day under supervision. Some facilities pick up people, bring them to doctor appointments and administer medications.
- **Respite care**, which can last from a few hours to several weeks, and allows caregivers to attend to other responsibilities or even take much needed vacations while knowing that their loved one is being well cared for.
- **In-home care**, which provides a variety of services, from hygiene to meal preparation to light housework.
- **Social workers**, whom you can find at hospitals and who can assess your situation and provide resources and guidance.
- **Support groups**, where you can meet other caregivers who can empathize with you. "There's nothing like sitting with a group of people who know your sighs," Cantwell says. "It's an atmosphere of honesty that can't be duplicated."

Jones decided to find a senior center for her mother to spend her days. "It's difficult. Your whole life becomes enveloped in caregiving. You never think it's going to happen to you, but all of a sudden it does." **SPW**

*Julie Jacobs is a freelance writer from Scotch Plains, NJ.*

\*not her real name