

Lightening the Load: Stress Reduction for Care Partners

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November is National Caregivers Month in the US

- ◆ Given that we are honoring carepartners and caregivers this month, let's examine what national studies have found regarding the nature of caregiving. The NARCOMS study of MS caregivers, the National Evercare Study by the National Alliance for Caregiving and other large research studies have found compelling evidence of stress, depression and declining health of caregivers.

First Question

- ◆ So, let me ask you my first question tonight:
- ◆ WHY DO Caregivers/carepartners have so much stress and what do we know about it?
- ◆ I did not ask why do they have stress, but why do they have so much stress?

The Evercare Study

- ◆ This study was done in 2010 and is the most comprehensive national survey of American caregivers conducted.
- ◆ It indicates that 21% of American households contain at least one caregiver and that pervasive stress, worry and sleep deprivation leads caregivers to neglect their own health. This includes dental appointments, regular check ups, exercise, social support and other forms of self-care.

Additional Findings

- ◆ 91% reported a decline in their health
- ◆ 81% indicated that caregiving made pre-existing depression worse
- ◆ 50% reported that their stress impedes their ability to provide care.
- ◆ 82% reported that their doctors or their care recipients' doctors were aware of their caregiving role, but only half report that doctors suggested any ways they can take better care of themselves.

The Number One Complaint

- ◆ Participants in this study identified STRESS as the most pervasive health problem in their lives as a result of being overwhelmed with caregiving responsibilities and being worried about their loved ones or care recipients.
- ◆ Stress was indicated by a variety of symptoms including headache, backache, increased blood pressure, sleep deprivation, heart attack scares and flare ups of health conditions.

The Big Picture

- ◆ The gross majority indicated they had insufficient relief from stress and often too lack of financial support or resources and in some instances, lack of social support which all re-enforced their stress.
- ◆ The toll of caregiving is enormous when there is insufficient relief from stress and lack of resources.
- ◆ And, it's estimated that by 2030, there will be a national shortage of paid direct care workers and unpaid family caregivers.

WHAT DO CARE PARTNERS WANT?

- ◆ Caregivers and care partners indicate that they want support services that:
 - ◆ SAVE THEM TIME
 - ◆ REDUCE STRESS EFFECTIVELY & QUICKLY
 - ◆ ENABLE THEM TO MANAGE THEIR OWN HEALTH MORE EFFECTIVELY
 - ◆ AND THAT THEY DO NOT HAVE TIME TO ATTEND COMMUNITY PROGRAMS

What are the Existing Resources for Caregivers/Carepartners?

- ◆ Most resources are provided by non-profit health care organization that focus on teaching tips for stress reduction and providing information and resources.
- ◆ If mind body techniques are taught, they're usually limited to diaphragmatic or belly breathing—not repetitive exposure to deeper states of relaxation and letting go of stress stored in the body.

My SECOND QUESTION

- ◆ SOOO, WHO TAUGHT YOU HOW TO RELAX??
- ◆ Typically, I have found most folks to say:
 - ◆ NO ONE

SO, WHAT IS THE BEST , FASTEST WAY TO RELAX AND RELIEVE STRESS?

- ◆ I have been trained in meditation, hypnosis, and guided imagery (GI).
- ◆ I have discovered over many years of clinical practice and several studies I have done, and over hundreds of folks I have trained, that RGI is the best mindbody method for this.
- ◆ It's gentle yet powerful in its effects, it's known to improve short term immune function, it does not require long-term practice, it's user-friendly (almost anyone can use it regardless of education, ethnicity or age) and unlike addiction, the more you use it the less you need.

The Advantages of RGI

- ◆ Because RGI brings on The Relaxation Response and then uses sensory images or processing to heighten right brain processing, it can create more rapid shifts in perception and behavior.
- ◆ It can improve sleep and rest, reduce tension headaches, shift pain, lower stress and muscle tension, lower blood pressure and heart rate and improve positive coping and sustain long term problem solving.
- ◆ It can also help prepare you rehearse for challenging medical procedures or tasks.

One of RGI's BEST FEATURES

- ◆ One of the great things about RGI is it's fun and easy to learn.
- ◆ You don't even have to be a believer for it to work.
- ◆ And you can do it almost anywhere, except while driving, and can learn to do snippets of it all day long, in stolen moments, maybe a minute here and there, all day long.
- ◆ And, for most Westerners, it is easier to use than traditional meditation as it requires less time and discipline to develop a high level of skill.

Why is RGI best Method for Caregivers/ Carepartners?

- ◆ RGI is actually great for auto-immune disorders including MS. There are numerous studies that I and others have done to confirm this. I now have a GI app called ImageryWork in which I have a whole page on the app of RGI tracks designed just for MS, to lower anxiety & stress associated with MS and to manage certain MS symptoms.
- ◆ It's also wonderful for carepartners/caregivers because though we're built for stress, we are not taught how to lower stress when stress piles up or is sustained during long intervals of time.

The Problem Isn't Stress but how to lower it after being stressed....

- ◆ Stress is part of life because life is ever changing. Humans are built to adapt to it. The problem is not lowering our stress response when we don't need to stay at that level. For ex., if you're walking down the street and see a hungry tiger lock it's gaze on you.....what do you do?
- ◆ Your Stress response kicks in (SNS). Zebras do the same thing if out on the African plane and a hungry lion lurches at them. Their SNS goes into high gear.

But Zebras don't get ulcers.....

- ◆ Once they've escaped danger, that's it, they kick back down into the Relaxation response or the PSN.
- ◆ Humans though have to make meaning out of what they are experiencing and store memories and emotions, so they have to learn to shift between higher states of stress to lower ones, back and forth, back and forth...otherwise stress pile up physically, mentally and emotionally occurs.
- ◆ Understanding this, we can teach ourselves to become deeply relaxed and how to kick our stress back down by first relaxing our body NOT emptying our minds of thoughts, which most stressed or anxious people find very difficult to do.

If we add belly breathing...

- ◆ If we practice belly breathing and then use our senses through a guided imagery exercise, we don't have to work at relaxing which sounds Un American.
- ◆ In this relaxed state it's impossible to be in an anxious state and relaxed at the same time.
- ◆ If we add more sensory images to it, like going to an ideal place of relaxation or imagining someone easy to love with our senses, as you imagine this your body starts to treat these images as real effects in your body.

The Mind does not discriminate...

- ◆ In other words, the mind does not discriminate from the real event or image in the body.
- ◆ Our bodies treat the imagined image as if it is happening and these effects work like deep depth charges in the body, reverberating again and again.
- ◆ As we practice this combo of R & GI, our right brain processing is also heightened. This stimulates increased intuition, creativity, greater receptivity to being more open and receptive to experience, and symbolic reasoning.
- ◆ It also turns on our own natural pharmacy, our neuropeptides and neurotransmitters flush through our system longer and short-term immune function goes up.

In this relaxed state....

- ◆ In this relaxed state, the emotions, mood, physical state associated with the idea or image appear very vivid, very immediate and the healing effects of this image are experienced as a whole body state, as a whole person.
- ◆ Sensory images experienced in this relaxed state create a lived experience and evoke more powerful change than analyzing ones attitudes or behavior. We can practice strategies that work.
- ◆ When we apply this to a specific focus, we have an awesome ally, a way to experience a source of internal strength and skill in approaching a goal or sustaining long term coping and adjustments that caregiving requires.

So, Are you Ready to try IT?

- ◆ I am going to demo my basic RGI exercise which is a good way for folks with MS and carepartners to start with to get a taste of how it works and how it can create less stress and increase wellbeing.
- ◆ I call it: De-Stress 101. After we practice it, we can have some feedback about what it felt like.
- ◆ I have a longer Relieve Caregiver Stress GI track on my app as well, but it's difficult to demo in a dinner program as there is not enough time between courses to practice it.

Efficacy of Guided Imagery

- ◆ GI has been an integral part of Holistic Nursing Practice for many years and is a well regarded complementary therapy.
- ◆ Well-designed research studies have shown GI to:
 - 1) Reduce anxiety and depression (McKinney et al, 1997);
 - 2) Shift pain experience, eliminate headaches, reduce arthritic pain (Sharpe et al, 2001) and fibromyalgia (Whiting et al, 2001);
 - 3) Improve immune function (Gruzelier, 2002).

Efficacy of Guided Imagery (cont.)

- 4) Increase adherence to therapies and drug therapies (Mohr et al, 1997).
- 5) Lower MRI-related anxieties (Thompson and Coppano, 1994).
- 6) Lower blood pressure (Herman, 2002).
- 7) Prepare for surgery/chemo, reduce length of hospital stay post surgery (Dreher, 1998; Halpin et al, 2002).
- 8) Improve memory rehearsal in post stroke patients (Page et al, 2001).
- 9) Accelerate post surgical wound healing (Ginandes et al, 2003).

MOST RECENT STUDY OF GI AND MS

Case et al. (2018) found GI to significantly reduce fatigue, lower mood, and improve quality of life in a group of MS patients as compared to a control group of MS who did not utilize GI.

Imagery Work

Dr. Franco's Guided Imagery app ImageryWork can be downloaded on iPhone or Androids. Just go to app store, search for ImageryWork and download it.

To access free De-Stress 101 GI exercise, go to left side of app, scroll down to De-Stress 101 and click it.

If you wish to access an entire page of GI for MS or other GI Tracks, like Going to a Safe Place, or Imagine the Possibilities and others, you can click subscribe to subscribe to the app for a small charge per month.

Dr. Franco's website is: www.imagerywork.com