

Adult day care services provide much-needed break to family caregivers

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University Park, Pa. -- Adult day care services significantly reduce the stress levels of family caregivers of older adults with dementia, according to a team of Penn State and Virginia Tech researchers.

"Family members who care for dementia patients are susceptible to experiencing high levels of stress," said Steven Zarit [1], professor and head of the Department of Human Development and Family Studies [2] at Penn State. "One way of alleviating that stress is through the use of an adult day care center, which allows them a predictable break from caregiving responsibilities."

Not only do caregivers benefit from using such services, but dementia patients also gain from the break. Zarit and his colleagues showed that dementia patients who attend adult day care centers have fewer behavior problems and sleep better at night.

"The changes we have seen are as large as you'd get with medication, but with no side effects," he said.

Zarit and his team evaluated the stress levels of 150 caregivers by using a 24-hour daily diary to obtain baseline information prior to the use of an adult day care service. After the caregivers began the use of an adult daycare, the researchers gathered data at various times over a two-month period. The caregivers recorded entries in their diaries, both on days when their relatives went to an adult day care service and on days when their relatives stayed home. The researchers reported their results online in the Journals of Gerontology Series B: Psychological and Social Sciences.

"In the diaries, we asked the caregivers to discuss their moods and the moods of their relatives, how agitated or restless their relatives were, and how many sleep disturbances their relatives had, among other topics," said Zarit.

The team's results revealed that caregivers generally reported greater levels of stress exposure prior to the use of an adult day care service and on days

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when their relatives did not attend adult day care programs. The team also found that behavior problems and poor sleep were more likely to occur on days when dementia patients remained at home.

Zarit and his colleagues are now studying the possible physiological effects these services can have on family caregivers. They are using stress markers, such as the stress hormone cortisol, to examine the body's response to high-stress days when relatives with dementia stay home versus low-stress ones when relatives with dementia attend adult day care centers.

Other Penn State researchers involved in the study include Kyungmin Kim, graduate student, human development and family studies; Elia Femia, research associate, human development and family studies; David Almeida, professor of human development and family studies, and Peter Molenaar, professor of human development and psychology.

Also part of the study was Jyoti Savla, assistant professor of human development and gerontology, Virginia Tech.

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Links:

[1] <http://www.hhdev.psu.edu/hdfs/directory/bio.aspx?id=144>

[2] <http://www.hhdev.psu.edu/hdfs/>

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