

Caregiving can be stressful, but it could also lower risk of depression: Study

December 12 2023, by Esther Robards-Forbes



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Becoming a caregiver to an aging parent or spouse can be stressful, but a new study from a researcher at The University of Texas at Austin is questioning the idea that family caregiving is also a risk factor for

depression.

The study, [published](#) in the journal *Advances in Life Course Research*, found that depression in adult caregivers is mostly driven by having a loved one experiencing serious [health](#) problems, while becoming a [caregiver](#) is associated with fewer symptoms of depression.

"Decades of research on this topic indicate that there are positive and negative aspects to being a caregiver," said Sae Hwang Han, an assistant professor in the Department of Human Development and Family Sciences who is the author of the paper. "It's widely assumed the negatives far outweigh the positives, that [caregiving](#) is a chronic stressor and that it contributes to worse health and well-being. But the evidence doesn't always bear that out."

Recent studies have found that caregivers live longer than non-caregivers and that many caregivers describe caregiving as a positive experience that gives them meaning and purpose. It was these contradictions that led Han to conduct the study.

"Most previous studies start by identifying caregivers and compare their well-being to non-caregivers," Han said. "But having a loved one experience a serious health problem in later life is itself a very depressing event. It's unsurprising that these studies would find a heightened risk of depression in caregivers compared to non-caregivers, who often do not have serious health problems in the family. That's a misleading comparison, just as it would be misleading to compare the well-being of someone going through chemotherapy to someone who doesn't have cancer."

Han followed a group of adult children over the age of 50 who had a living mother. He tracked changes in their [mental health](#) as some of the mothers became disabled or cognitively impaired and the adult children

became caregivers. Han found that adult children became more depressed as their mothers' health deteriorated but found no evidence that becoming a caregiver worsened their depression.

"Rather, I found that caregiving alleviated the extent to which [adult children](#) became depressed in response to their mothers' health problems, suggesting that there may be something protective about being able to help others we care about," Han said.

A [2021 study](#) by Han and colleagues found that spouses providing caregiving to their partners saw similar effects.

About 1 in 5 Americans are providing caregiving to an adult with health and functional needs, and about half of people over 50 are caregivers to [older adults](#). Many people can expect to enter the caregiving role at some point in their lives, Han pointed out. While emphasizing the importance of social and policy interventions that continue to support caregivers, Han also said that this role does not have to be a source of dread and [depression](#).

"There is no disputing that caregiving can be a very stressful experience," he said. "But some stressful experiences also make you more resilient and help you grow."

More information: Sae Hwang Han, Revisiting the caregiver stress process: Does family caregiving really lead to worse mental health outcomes?, *Advances in Life Course Research* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.alcr.2023.100579](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.alcr.2023.100579)

Provided by University of Texas at Austin

Citation: Caregiving can be stressful, but it could also lower risk of depression: Study (2023, December 12) retrieved 9 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-12-caregiving-stressful-depression.html>

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