

Caring for Caregivers: Examining Stress Levels Post-TBI

By Matt Wetsel

Welcome to the first of a series of articles summarizing research findings based on the TBI Model Systems project. If you have participated in doing follow-ups post-injury with us through Model Systems, you may have asked, "What's all this research finding out?" Here is a brief summary of an award-winning research paper which came directly out of the Model Systems. The paper is titled "Caregivers' Well-Being after Traumatic Brain Injury: A Multicenter Prospective Investigation," and was published in the *Archives of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation* in June 2009.

Sometimes after a brain injury, survivors aren't able to fully care for themselves due to a wide range of problems which can occur. Emotional troubles, memory problems, and other cognitive deficiencies can make the transition back to normal living difficult. For example, research has shown that at least 1/4 of TBI survivors are at risk for depression. Spouses, parents, siblings, or others close to the survivor often take on the role of a caregiver as the survivor recovers. Concern for the welfare of family members has led to more research on emotional distress, such as depression or anxiety, among those who become caregivers to a TBI survivor.

Researchers gave additional surveys to about 300 caregivers of people in the TBI Model Systems. About 30% were spouses, 50% were parents, and the remaining 20% were adult children, siblings, other relatives, significant others, or close friends providing some form of care to a survivor. About

75% of all caregivers lived with the TBI survivor and spent time with them every day.

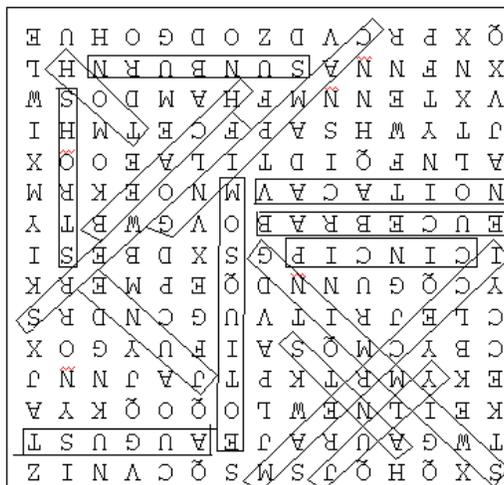
In this study, it was found that roughly 1/3 of family members who provide care to TBI survivors are at risk for depression, anxiety, or other forms of psychological & emotional distress. A number of factors seemed to increase the chance that a caregiver would be more at risk for some form of emotional distress. In general, the more disabled a person was and the more supervision they required, the more likely it was that a caregiver had a significant level of depression or anxiety.

The survivor's involvement in their community, through things like employment, volunteer work, or school was linked to caregiver well-being. If a survivor was able to participate in a productive activity, caregivers were less at risk for emotional distress. The emotional health of the survivor also seemed to have an impact on the caregiver. If the survivor reported being depressed or dissatisfied with their life, it was more likely that the caregiver did too. Finally, if the survivor consumed excessive amounts of alcohol, it increased the chances that the caregiver would have significant depression or anxiety.

Remember that the other 2/3 of respondents seemed to be coping well. More research needs to be done on effective coping techniques for caregivers. The results emphasize the importance of caregivers taking care of themselves, too, either through counseling, support groups, or in their community such as religious institutions and friends.

Word Search answers!

How did you do?



Word Scramble Answers:

Do you know which states each capital goes to?

- | | |
|-----------------|---------------|
| 9. RATEIGH | 1. MONTGOMERY |
| 10. NASHVILLE | 2. PHOENIX |
| 11. AUSTIN | 3. DENVER |
| 12. RICHMOND | 4. ATLANTA |
| 13. TALLAHASSEE | 5. BOSTON |
| 14. BOISE | 6. JACKSON |
| 15. COLUMBUS | 7. TRENTON |
| | 8. ALBANY |