



PERCEIVED STRESS AND POSITIVITY IN MIDDLE AGE VERSUS OLD DEMENTIA CAREGIVERS

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Background

Informal caregivers, including spouses and children, of dementia patients provide the majority of long-term care in the United States (Vitaliano et al., 2004). Today, five million caregivers provide care for individuals aged 50 and older with dementia (National Alliance for Caregiving and AARP, 1997). More than half of all diagnosed Alzheimer's patients continue to live in home settings, and 80 to 90 percent of these individuals rely on family members for care (www.americangeriatrics.org/education/forum/alzcare.html). By 2050, 14 million Americans are expected to have Alzheimer's disease (Rodgers, 2003). We can expect to see an equally dramatic increase in the number of individuals who will become their caregivers.

Caring for a progressively dementing spouse or parent is considered to be a chronic stressor, which can be defined as frequent, long-term exposure to events perceived to be stressful. The impact of chronic stress on psychosocial and physical attributes of caregivers has been well studied. Little research has been done, however, to further characterize the caregiver population along other dimensions such as age, caregiver role (i.e., spouse or child), perceived burden, and emotional impact. A greater understanding of how and why caregivers are differentially influenced by their role has important clinical and research implications.

Method

39 informal middle age (43 to 65) and old (65 to 81) caregivers recruited from local support groups completed a take-home packet of seven standardized clinical measures. The following four were used for the analyses:

- 1.) **Perceived Stress Scale (PSS):** Measures the perception of stress. The items are designed to tap into how unpredictable, uncontrollable, and overloaded respondents find their lives during the past month.
- 2.) **Screen for Caregiver Burden (SCB):** Measures the prevalence of caregiver experience deemed to be upsetting (e.g., financial responsibility, grooming dementia individual) as well as the subjective distress associated with each over the past two weeks.
- 3.) **Geriatric Depression Scale (GDS):** Identifies depressive symptoms in older adults. The items cover a range of depressive symptoms including mood quality, level of energy and motivation, hopelessness, social initiative and subjective evaluation of various cognitive functions.

- 4.) **Positivity Effect (PE):** Determined by calculating the proportion of positive and negative statements in the caregivers' response to the question, "What are the pros and cons of being a caregiver?" See examples below:

Pro:

"As complex and as daunting as this entire end-of-life issue may be, this is precious time that I have been given an opportunity to engage in fully. A daughter assisting her mother gracefully through this enormous transformation. What a blessing!"

Con:

"There are no pros. I love my mother she was the best, but she is no more. She is just a body. . . I can accept my dad's death. His body gone out and he died, but this- this is cruel to my mother and to those of us in the family who care."

"Destroys any type of normal life for an individual with no end in sight."

Results

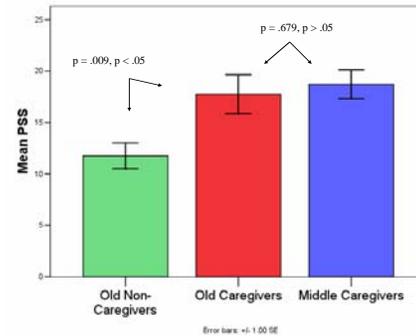


Figure 1.
Mean PSS by Non-Caregivers versus Caregivers

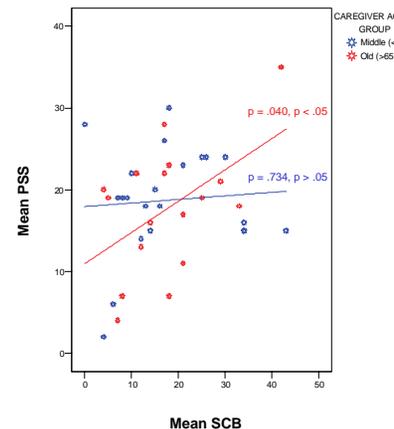


Figure 2.
Correlation between PSS and SCB for Middle and Old Caregivers

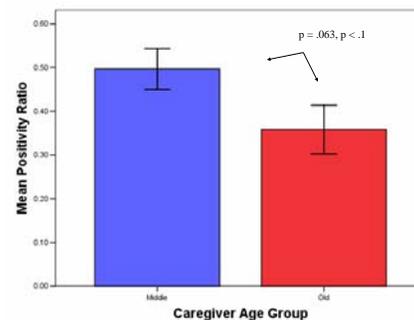


Figure 3:
Mean Positivity Ratio for Middle and Old Caregivers

Participants

Participants (Means & SDs)	Non-Caregivers	Old Caregivers	Middle Age Caregivers
Gender	21F, 15M	13F, 4M	22F
Age	72.15 (6.09)	73.82 (4.74)	57.09 (5.76)
Education Level	16.75 (2.63)	15.00 (2.66)	15.21 (3.08)
GDS	N/A	4.18 (3.80)	3.00 (2.02)
Caregiver Relationship to Patient	N/A	13 Spouse, 1 Child, 3 Other	2 Spouse, 18 Child, 2 Other

Conclusions

- Old caregivers scored significantly higher on the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) than age-matched non-caregivers (Figure 1).
- Middle age caregivers and old caregivers did not differ significantly on PSS scores, indicating that both groups perceive their roles to be stressful (Figure 1).
- Old, but not middle age, caregivers show a significant correlation between PSS scores and Screen for Caregiver Burden (SCB) (Figure 2).
- Middle age caregivers showed a marginally significant trend towards greater positivity than old caregivers (Figure 3). This finding is of interest in light of Carstensen's (2005) Socioemotional Selectivity Theory and well-established positivity effect in which people become increasingly positive as they age.

Future Directions

- Why do middle age caregivers, despite having comparable PSS scores to old caregivers, display greater positivity than old caregivers? What is the role of gender?
- Future work should investigate the influence of caregiver age and patient relationship to determine why middle age caregivers appear to manage their stress in a more positive manner.

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