

Can Providing Support to Dementia Caregivers Improve Their Quality of Life?

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The full report is titled “Enhancing the Quality of Life of Dementia Caregivers from Different Ethnic or Racial Groups. A Randomized, Controlled Trial.” It is in the 21 November 2006 issue of *Annals of Internal Medicine* (volume 145, pages 727-738). The authors are S.H. Belle, L. Burgio, R. Burns, D. Coon, S.J. Czaja, D. Gallagher-Thompson, L.N. Gitlin, J. Klingler, K.M. Koepke, C.C. Lee, J. Martindale-Adams, L. Nichols, R. Schulz, S. Stahl, A. Stevens, L. Winter, and S. Zhang, for the Resources for Enhancing Alzheimer’s Caregiver Health (REACH) II Investigators.

What is the problem and what is known about it so far?

Dementia is a progressive decline in thinking, memory, and the ability to learn. People with dementia need help with basic activities, such as cooking and bathing. Most also eventually need around-the-clock supervision from caregivers. Because the need becomes constant, many caregivers become depressed and exhausted. Support helps the depression and exhaustion. It can lead to improvement in dementia symptoms and can also delay the caregiver’s need to send the person with dementia to a nursing home. However, most caregivers do not receive the support that they need.

Why did the researchers do this particular study?

To develop and test a way to provide support to dementia caregivers.

Who was studied?

642 dementia caregivers: 212 were Hispanic, 219 were white, and 211 were black.

How was the study done?

The researchers randomly assigned caregivers to receive written educational materials about dementia or to receive intensive support. Types of support included help with depression and exhaustion and with managing difficult behaviors of the person with dementia. After 6 months, the researchers measured and compared the quality of the lives of the caregivers in the 2 groups. They also compared the numbers of people with dementia who were sent to nursing homes.

What did the researchers find?

The researchers found that the quality of the lives of the caregivers improved more with intensive support than with just educational materials. The effect did not differ by caregiver race. However, Hispanic and white caregivers and black caregivers who were married to the person they were caring for seemed especially likely to benefit. The number of people with dementia who were sent to nursing homes did not differ between the groups.

What were the limitations of the study?

The study lasted only 6 months. The findings might have been different if the caregivers had received more support over a longer time. Also, not all ethnicities were included in the study. Those that were included people with very different backgrounds and needs.

What are the implications of the study?

Provision of intensive support to caregivers for 6 months can improve their quality of life. It did not reduce the need to send the people they were caring for to nursing homes. These effects did not differ by caregiver race or ethnicity.