
THE STRESS OF CHRONIC MENTAL ILLNESS AFFECTS BOTH MENTAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH OF THE CAREGIVERS.

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Introduction:

The psychological consequences on the caregivers taking care of mentally ill patients are well known; however, little evidence exists as to whether taking care of a mentally ill patient affects the physical health of the caregiver.

Objective:

To examine the effect of caregiving on emotional and physical health.

Aim:

To study the association between caregiving for mentally ill and physical illness.

Methods:

One hundred twenty-eight caregivers, relatives of patients suffering from schizophrenia or bipolar disorder, who were hospitalized consecutively during the past three years (2011-2013), and 117 controls completed over telephone a structured questionnaire. Eligible patients were all those with duration of illness more than 5 yrs. Data included demographics and detailed information about past or present mental and/or physical illness. Data were analyzed using the Pearson's chi-square test and multivariate binary regression controlling for BMI, age, sex, and smoking.

Results:

Significant correlation was found between caregiving and anxiety (OR=4,1, $p<0,0001$), depression (OR=3,5 $p=0,03$), sleep disturbances (OR=2,6, $p=0,05$), arthritis (OR=2,5, $p=0,03$), rheumatopathy (OR=2,8, $p=0,09$) and allergies (OR=2,5, $p=0,09$). The association of caregiving with allergies/ arthritis was independent of anxiety and depression. No correlation was found with diabetes, hypertension and cardiovascular disease.

Conclusion:

The stress of taking care of a mentally ill patient appears to affect physical health, specifically increasing the risk for autoimmune disorders (allergy, arthritis), independently of anxiety, depression and sleep disturbances.