

Silent Struggle: Understanding The Psychological Impacts of Providing Informal Care

(SMU REB File Number: 25-011)

Laura Strong and Dr. Patrick Carolan

Approximately 19% of American adults provide unpaid care to family or friends, usually to adults over 65 or with disabilities (Robison et al., 2009). Although providing informal care is associated with negative outcomes such as depression (Losada-Baltar et al., 2024), there are also positive aspects of caregiving such as an enhanced well-being, having rewarding experiences, and feeling a sense of fulfillment in one's life (Lee et al., 2020).

This study examined the psychological impacts of providing informal care using a Qualtrics survey (N = 65) with questions related to demographics, socioeconomic status (SES), positive and negative affect, characteristics of caregiving, and the need for community long-term care services. Initial analyses indicated that informal caregivers (n = 27) experienced significantly more negative affect than non-caregivers (n = 38), despite groups being comparable on sociodemographic factors such as age, ethnicity, nationality, province of residence, income adequacy, community type, and employment status. The other psychosocial factors tested between these two groups such as overall health, preventative health behaviors, social isolation, depressive symptoms, and positive affect, did not yield any significant differences.

Analyses completed amongst the group of informal caregivers showed that those who live with the care receiver, care for someone of the same age, or care for someone with memory problems were significantly less likely to receive a dental cleaning in the past year, while caregivers who care for someone with memory problems reported significantly higher levels of positive affect than caregivers whose care receiver does not have memory problems.

Although caregiving status or all characteristics of caregiving were not found to be associated with worse health or psychosocial outcomes, further research should aim to account for why caregivers experience increased levels of negative affect or why caring for someone with memory problems results in higher levels of positive affect.

If you have any questions regarding the study, you can reach out to the faculty supervisor, Dr. Patrick Carolan, through email at patrick.carolan@smu.ca