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The New Old Age

Caring and Coping

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Love's Labor

By JANE GROSS

The unpaid services of America's family caregivers amounted to some \$375 billion in 2007, up from \$350 billion in 2006. Those are the latest findings from the [AARP Public Policy Institute](#), which recently updated a similar report it conducted last year.

The report, "[Valuing the Invaluable: The Economic Value of Family Caregiving](#)," estimates that 34 million American adults provide an average of 21 hours a week of care to another adult, usually an elderly parent or spouse, worth \$10.10 an hour in the marketplace.

That's a bloodless way of thinking about the typical caregiver, who is defined in a series of benchmark studies as a 46-year-old woman, married, employed and looking after a widowed mother who needs help with everyday tasks and medical issues. But you know who they're talking about: You.

You have a full-time job, a demanding husband, probably children of your own. You spend nights and weekends neglecting your own family while doing your mother's grocery shopping and visiting her because she rarely gets out anymore. When she has a doctor's appointment you skip work. She's fallen a few times and you've raced from the office, or a Little League game, to the emergency room. You're always tired. You don't have enough time for anyone, and you have no time at all for yourself.

If your mother has paid help at home, you hire and supervise the aides, which is surprisingly difficult and time-consuming. Depending on whether they drive, you're still doing the shopping and going to medical appointments. Your mother calls to complain about the aides, and they call to complain about her. Maybe your mother has moved to an assisted living facility or a nursing home. You're still in charge, in countless ways, plus you feel really, really guilty.

If mom lives with you, you've won best-in-show among daughters but you're always on call — always! — and you better have a saintly husband. Are your siblings helping? Or is that a whole 'nother story? You and others like you provide 80 percent of the long-term care in this country. AARP calls you the backbone of the nation's long-term care system. You *are* the system.

The AARP report also notes the other costs of caregiving. Out-of-pocket expenses for our hypothetical 40-something daughter — on groceries, home repair, medications for her mother — average \$5,531 a year. If mom lives in Florida and you in New York, that'll be \$8,728 a year because of travel, long-distance telephone and the like.

There are also lost benefits — wages, Social Security, health insurance, pension and others — when a caregiver finds it necessary to quit a job or work part-time. And health issues, both physical and emotional, related to the stress and to ignoring one's own aches and pains in favor of someone else's.

But the rewards for the caregiver are considerable: Your mother is less likely to wind up in a nursing home or avoid it longer because of your ministrations. She's also less likely to wind up in the hospital with an illness or injury, because you're keeping an eye on things. And she's less likely to be re-admitted after a hospitalization, which these days are so short that the elderly need lots of attention when they get home.

The report, which includes state-by-state data, references [ADLs and IADLs](#), or "activities of daily living" and "instrumental activities of daily living." These terms come up frequently in the literature of long-term care and, despite efforts to avoid this kind of jargon, in my posts.

So, for the uninitiated, walking, bathing, using the toilet, eating and grooming are activities of daily living; being unable to do any of them without help is a measure of significant disability. Instrumental activities of daily living include shopping, cooking, housekeeping and managing medications, which for the elderly often require help.