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## University researcher confirms stress associated with assisting older parents

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BLACKSBURG, VA., September 24, 2008 -- Jyoti Savla, assistant professor of human development and gerontology in Virginia Tech's College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences, has led a team of researchers that systematically studied diaries that examined the stresses of daily life in conjunction with helping an older parent. Results clearly suggest a downward trajectory of health and well-being among midlife adults helping an elderly parent.

"The accumulation of small and large daily stressors such as work deadlines, PTA meetings, supporting family and friends as well as providing routine assistance to a parent living outside one's house can build up," said Savla. "Sooner or later, they can spill over into other areas of life with negative mental and physical consequences. Days when help is provided to parents are more stressful than days when it is not."

Half of all individuals who provided help to parents did so on two or more days each week. Most individuals who provided help to parents were also juggling multiple roles each day, which could lead to conflicts between the roles, or feeling overloaded. In addition to helping parents, most individuals spent nearly five hours on work-related activities, two hours on work in their own household, with about 10 hours for sleep, leisure, and exercise.

Savla and her colleagues found that several personal characteristics could decrease the experienced conflict and demands on time, such as having a spouse and higher education. Those who believed in personal growth, mastery, and self-acceptance experienced fewer negative consequences in providing help to parents.

Programs that specifically target the everyday care events that are stressful for baby boomers are likely to be most beneficial. "By building on an understanding of individuals' experiences, this approach could make daily life easier for older adults and the individuals who support them and prevent the depletion of care resources," said Savla.

The researchers detailed their findings in a paper "Routine Assistance to Parents: Effects on Daily Mood and Other Stressors," published in the May 2008 issue of the *Journal of Gerontology: Social Sciences*, a journal of the Gerontological Society of America. The authors are Savla, David M. Almeida, Steven H. Zarit (Department of Human Development and Family Studies, The Pennsylvania State University) and Adam Davey (College of Health Professions, Temple University). The data came from the National Study of Daily Experiences (NSDE), a large national daily diary study, which is a part of the National Survey of Midlife Development in the United States (MIDUS) carried out under the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Network for Successful Midlife Development.

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