A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR MANAGING

Heart Disease



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Caregiving with Confidence

Heart disease consists of a variety of conditions that compromise heart health and function. The most common type of heart disease in the U.S. is coronary artery disease, a chronic condition that can lead to heart attack and stroke.

In Florida, more than 10% of adults aged 65+ are living with some form of heart disease, making it one of the most prevalent illnesses. If you're caring for a parent, spouse or loved one diagnosed with heart disease, you already have an idea of how serious it is, but may not know enough to feel confident in your caregiving abilities. Use this practical guide to prepare for the challenges ahead and to reduce the risk of complications.

Types of Heart Disease

- **Coronary artery disease (CAD)**, damage to the heart's major blood vessels
- **Atherosclerosis**, hardening of the arteries due to plaque build-up
- **Arrhythmia**, irregular heart beat
- **Heart failure**, weakness in the heart muscle that prevents it from pumping properly



Lifestyle Changes

Long-term lifestyle changes are necessary to reduce the risk of heart attack and stroke that comes with heart disease. Diet and exercise changes can slow disease progression, alleviate symptoms, prevent future health problems and improve quality of life.

Take a look at some typical lifestyle changes and talk with the doctor if you see any gaps in the treatment plan.

Compliance



Is your loved one following the treatment plan? Compliance with "doctor's orders," from stopping smoking to taking medications as prescribed, is critical to preventing hospitalization. Management of heart disease often requires changing established behaviors and habits.

Smoking Cessation



It's common knowledge that smoking is a major cause of heart disease. But there is a silver lining. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), within five years of quitting, smokers lower their risk of stroke to nearly that of a person who has never smoked! Alert friends and family members of the need to quit smoking so they can offer support. Look into smoking-cessation programs and consider medication if other efforts fail.

Exercise



People with heart disease may struggle with activities such as climbing stairs. Even a mild or moderate exercise program can increase energy and strength. Many physicians encourage 30–60 minutes of aerobic activity at least five days a week. If your loved one has surgery, various levels of exercise may be added back over time. Always follow the doctor's instructions since recovery time can vary by person.

Lifestyle Changes *(continued)*

According to the American Heart Association, a healthy lifestyle is the best way to fight heart disease. Lifestyle modifications may be necessary to manage high blood pressure, high cholesterol and diabetes – key risk factors that can lead to heart attacks.

Vaccines

Both the World Health Organization and the American Heart Association recommend a flu shot for people living with heart disease since influenza can lead to unwanted complications and hospitalizations. Ask your loved one or the doctor if vaccinations are up to date.

Alcohol

People with heart disease are encouraged to limit alcohol intake to one to two drinks a day for men and one drink a day for women. Remember, one drink consists of four ounces of wine, a 12-ounce beer, or one ounce of spirits.

Diet

In addition to daily physical activity, weight management and dietary restrictions are helpful for management of heart disease, including a diet that is low in saturated and trans fats, cholesterol and salt. Your doctor may recommend switching to low-fat dairy products and adding more fruits and vegetables to the daily menu. Saturated fats should account for less than 7% of total calories in order to maintain a healthy weight. If your loved one is struggling, ask the doctor for a referral to a dietician or nutritionist.

Symptom & Medication Management

Frequent assessment of symptoms is recommended by cardiologists to inform necessary adjustments to medications and prevent symptoms from worsening. The American Heart Association, for example, offers a Self-Check Plan for management of heart failure, a chronic illness that requires close monitoring and daily assessment of symptoms.

Medication Management. Perhaps the single most important strategy for managing heart disease is to take medications exactly as prescribed by the physician. Even missing one dose can result in a trip to the emergency room. Create a list of all of your loved one's medications, organize a weekly pill box, and schedule reminders on your smart phone.

Sodium. People living with heart disease should be aware of the salt intake in their diet since it causes the body to retain water and stress the heart. Help your loved one read nutritional labels on foods for sodium content. There is hidden salt in many prepared and canned foods, so incorporating whole foods into the diet as often as possible will help with avoiding excess salt.

Fluid Intake. People with chronic heart failure are often advised by their physician to limit fluid intake since excess water in the body can also stress the heart. Experts suggest limiting fluid intake to two liters or eight cups each day of any type of fluid. Some physicians recommend filling a two-liter bottle with water and pouring it out cup for cup throughout the day to keep track of intake.

Weight Log. For people managing heart failure, it is critically important to check weight on a daily basis for fluid build-up. Invest in a proper scale for your loved one and ensure it's placed on a hard, flat surface. Use of a daily log can assist with keeping track of weight changes. Experts recommend weighing at the same time every day—generally after using the bathroom—and recording it in a log. Alert the physician if there is weight gain or swelling.

Common Heart Medications



- **Beta-blockers** open the blood vessels to promote blood flow and slow the beating of the heart, lowering blood pressure and easing angina (chest pain)
- **Diuretics** help the body get rid of extra fluids and sodium to reduce swelling and lower blood pressure
- **ACE inhibitors** expand blood vessels to help make it easier for the heart to pump blood
- **Digitalis preparations** help the heart produce stronger contractions, often prescribed when ACE inhibitors and diuretics don't achieve the desired improvements
- **Anticoagulants ("blood thinners")** or antiplatelet agents help prevent blood clots from forming
- **Statins** help keep cholesterol and other lipids under control

Heart Attack Preparedness

Are you worried your loved one will have a heart attack on your watch? It's a common concern for those caring for someone with heart disease. Getting prepared is a great way to help ease your mind.

First, make sure you understand heart attack symptoms. Many people associate chest pain with heart attack, but chest pain only occurs about a third of the time. Other symptoms are less well known. A recent study by the CDC revealed that only 27% of people knew all the major symptoms of heart attack. In addition to chest pain or pressure, symptoms to be aware of are:

- Shortness of breath
- Lightheadedness, dizziness or fainting
- Discomfort in the arms, back, neck, jaw or upper stomach
- Cold sweats
- Nausea or vomiting

Don't let uncertainty about symptoms stop you from calling for help. Women in particular tend to hesitate to "bother" 911 with a false alarm. When in doubt, it's best to reach out.

Gather the information emergency personnel will need and keep it somewhere you can grab quickly. Be sure to include:

- "Master list" of the medications, dosages and dosage times
- Contact information for the doctor
- Date of birth and medical diagnosis

Preparedness To Dos

- ❑ Review all the major signs of heart attack
- ❑ Compile information about emergency personnel, including medical history and providers
- ❑ Ask the doctor if it is safe to take an aspirin or nitroglycerin tablet when a heart attack is suspected



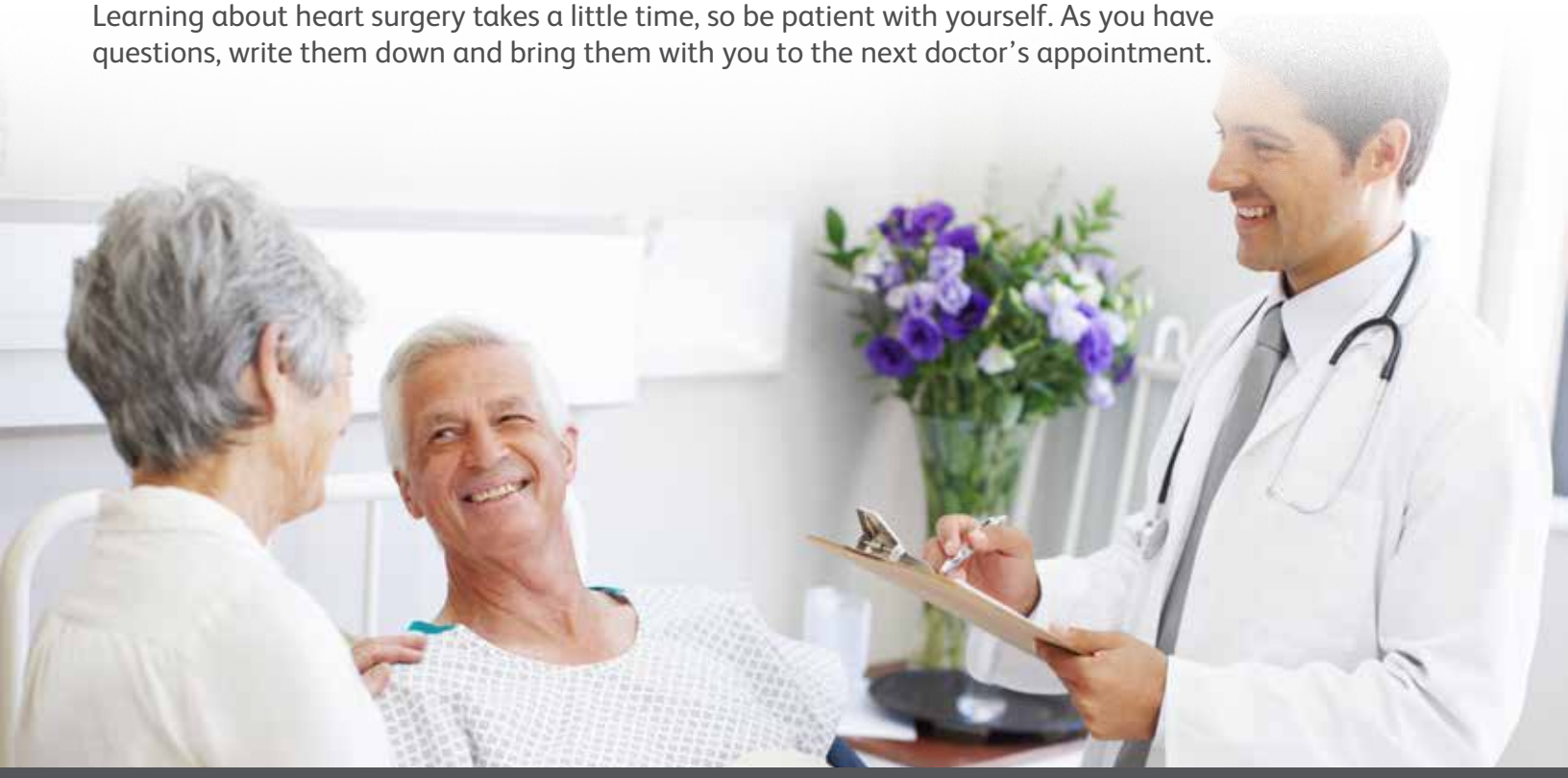
Cardiovascular Surgery

When lifestyle changes and medication aren't enough to manage your loved one's heart disease, surgery may be recommended. There are numerous options, depending on the specific diagnosis, but most surgeries are designed to restore blood flow to the heart.

Among the most common approaches, coronary artery revascularization can significantly extend the lives of people with heart failure and other long-term effects of heart disease. There are two main surgical procedures:

- Minimally invasive percutaneous coronary intervention (PCI), also called angioplasty and stenting
- Open-chest coronary artery bypass graft surgery (CABG)

Learning about heart surgery takes a little time, so be patient with yourself. As you have questions, write them down and bring them with you to the next doctor's appointment.



Common Cardiac Surgeries



- **Catheter ablation** uses radiofrequency energy to destroy heart tissue causing arrhythmias
- **Myocardial revascularization (TMR)** uses a laser to relieve severe angina
- **Cardiomyoplasty** electrically stimulates the heart to improve systolic function (pumping)
- **Angioplasty** uses a balloon, stent or laser to increase blood flow through blocked arteries
- **Atherectomy** removes plaque from blocked arteries to improve blood flow
- **Heart valve replacement** removes a failed heart valve and substitutes a mechanical valve or valve made from human or animal tissue to restore function
- **Bypass surgery** uses grafts to restore blood flow to the heart and reduce risk of heart attack
- **Heart transplant** replaces a damaged heart with a healthy human heart from an organ donor

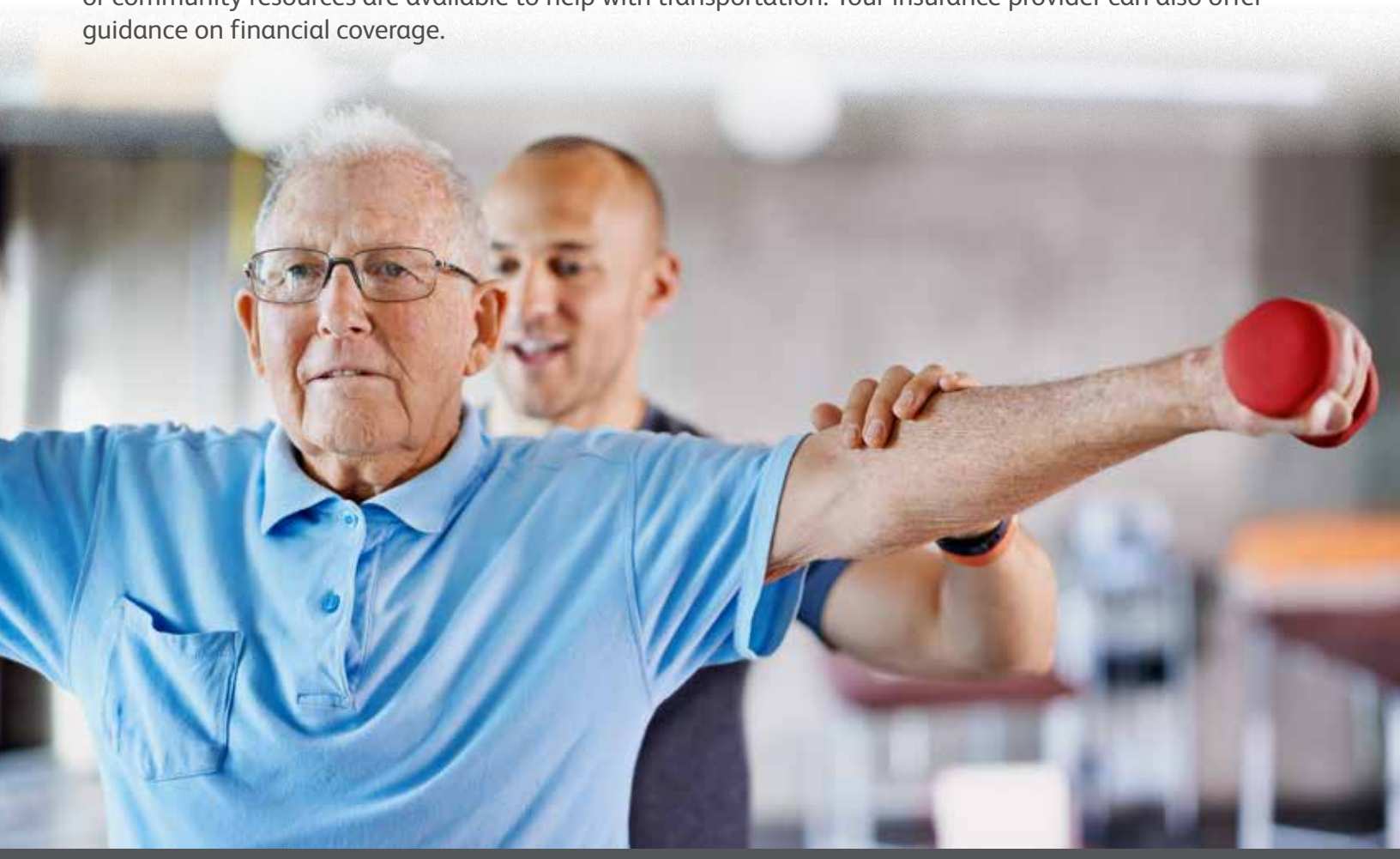
Cardiac Rehabilitation

If your loved one has heart surgery, cardiac rehabilitation will likely be offered to build strength and mobility, speed recovery, reverse the progression of heart disease, and reduce the chances of future heart attack. Unfortunately, up to 35% of those who are offered a program don't participate. Two words: do it!

Cardiac rehabilitation typically provides all of the following:

- Personalized exercise program designed by an exercise physiologist and overseen by a cardiologist
- Close monitoring of your loved one's physical progress
- Social, mental and emotional support for your loved one

Cardiac rehabilitation programs usually last for 12 to 18 weeks, with sessions three times a week. If barriers like work demands hold you back from helping your loved one participate, ask the doctor if medical center or community resources are available to help with transportation. Your insurance provider can also offer guidance on financial coverage.





4 Phases of Cardiac Rehabilitation

1. Walking within 24 hours of heart attack
2. Monitored exercise sessions that get increasingly more challenging
3. Exercise sessions with lighter monitoring
4. Exercise sessions without monitoring

Caregiver Support

Caregivers need care, too. You're not being selfish when you take a break to take care of other things—including yourself. Think of helping manage a chronic disease as a marathon, not a sprint.

Consider joining a community or faith-based support group to help you through the hard times. Some caregivers also benefit from professional counseling.

Stress Relief for Caregivers

- Make a time to connect with friends
- Do something you enjoy once a day—reading, playing music, trying a new recipe
- Start a journal to express your feelings
- Try an adult coloring book to relax

Caregiver Burnout

The consequences of continually putting yourself last can be serious. You don't want to reach a state of mental, emotional and physical exhaustion. As you're keeping an eye on your loved one's symptoms, remain aware of your own.

Symptoms of Caregiver Burnout

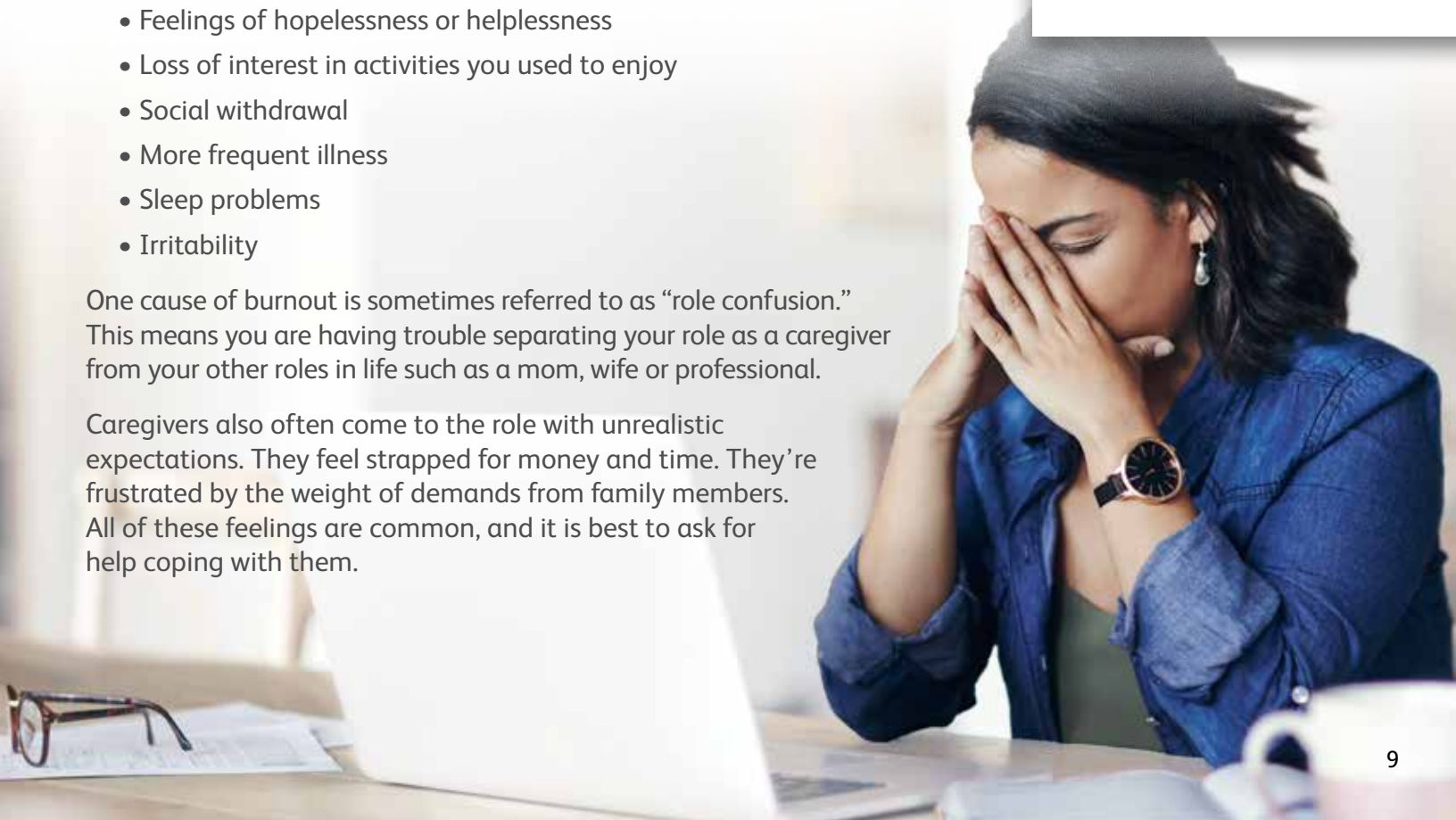
- Feelings of hopelessness or helplessness
- Loss of interest in activities you used to enjoy
- Social withdrawal
- More frequent illness
- Sleep problems
- Irritability

One cause of burnout is sometimes referred to as "role confusion." This means you are having trouble separating your role as a caregiver from your other roles in life such as a mom, wife or professional.

Caregivers also often come to the role with unrealistic expectations. They feel strapped for money and time. They're frustrated by the weight of demands from family members. All of these feelings are common, and it is best to ask for help coping with them.

How To Avoid Caregiver Burnout

- ❑ Join a caregiver support group
- ❑ Set realistic goals for how much you can do
- ❑ Consider respite care to fill the gap
- ❑ Accept that the time may come for assisted living



Get Help

Remember that heart disease is a serious chronic condition. It entails lifelong changes in lifestyle, symptom monitoring and medication management. It may even include the need for surgery and cardiac rehabilitation.

Don't wait until you reach caregiver burnout to get the help you need. In-person and online support groups are available, as well as respite care services from senior living communities in Florida.

If your loved one's needs become more than you can fulfill, and full-time professional care becomes necessary, that's not a failure on your part. It's simply part of the progression of heart disease. This is an important thing to recognize so you can think clearly about what's best for you and your loved one.

Florida Resources

Caregiver Support

Florida Department of Elder Affairs
800-955-8770

Aging and Disability Resource Centers (ADRCs)
800-96 ELDER (800-963-5337)

American Heart Association Online Support Network
800-AHA-USA-1 (800-242-8721)

AARP Caregiving Support Line
877-333-5885

Caregiver Education

American Heart Association

American Stroke Association

Sonata Senior Living

National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute

Mayo Clinic



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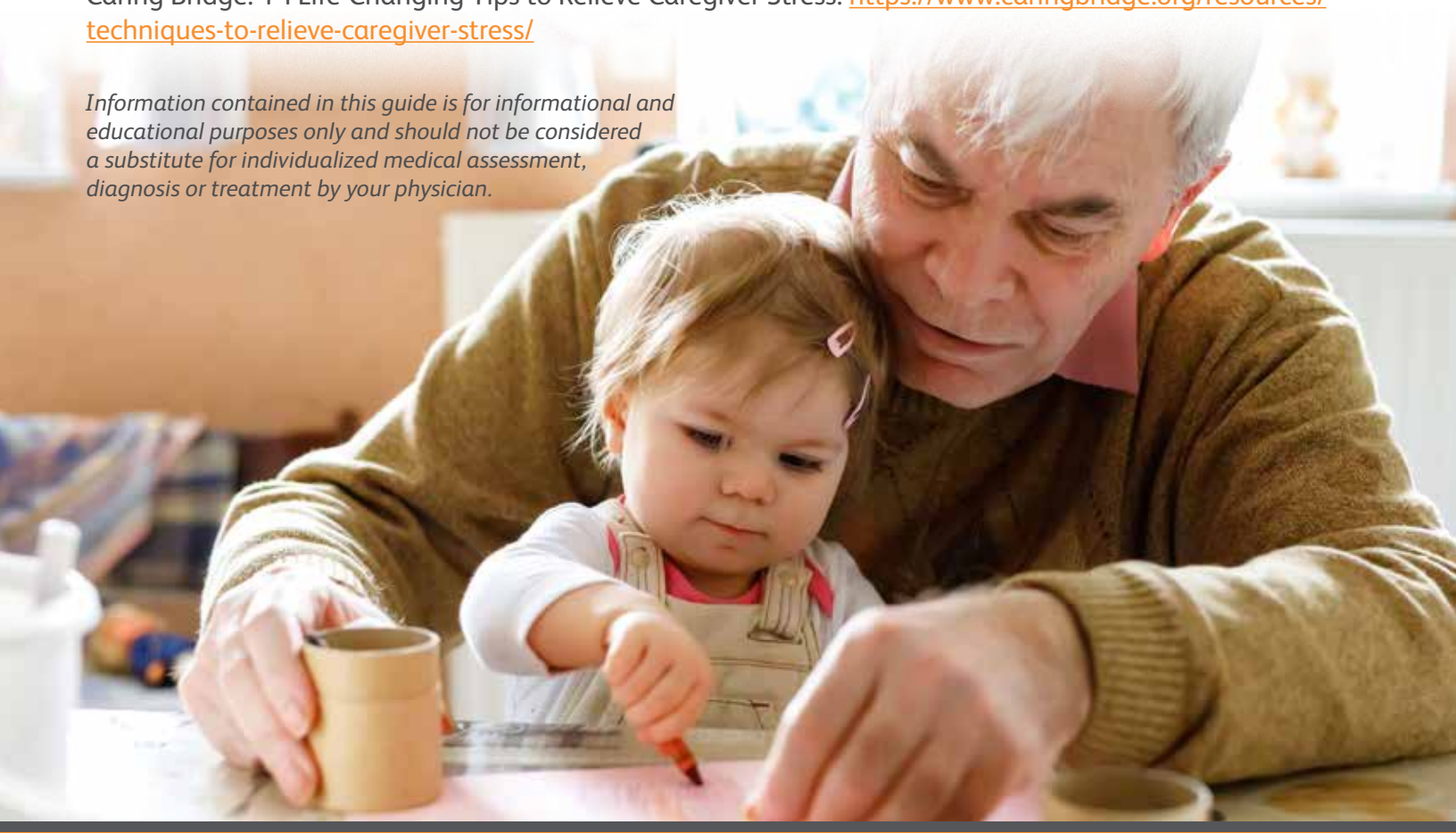

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