

Webinar Title

Daily Caregiver Mental Health: A Dynamic Risk Factor of Elder Mistreatment.

Author(s)

Frank Puga, PhD

Citation (with Web link or DOI)

Puga, F., Wang, D., Rafford, M., Poe, A., & Pickering, C. E. Z. (2023). The relationship between daily stressors, social support, depression and anxiety among dementia family caregivers: a micro-longitudinal study. *Aging & mental health*, 27(7), 1291–1299. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13607863.2022.2116392>

Summary of Research (500 word max)

Caregiver mental health is a critical component of care quality and safety, particularly for caregivers of individuals with Alzheimer's disease and related dementias (ADRD). This research examines daily variations in caregiver mental health, which can serve as a predictor of the risk of elder mistreatment, offering evidence to support dynamic assessments as a tool for early detection and intervention. Over 20% of adults in the U.S. provide care for a family member, friend, or neighbor. Caregivers often face unique mental health challenges, with dementia caregivers reporting higher rates of stress, anxiety, and depression than non-caregivers. Approximately 60% of ADRD spousal caregivers develop clinically significant mental health conditions within two years. Poor caregiver mental health is associated with an increased risk for harmful behaviors, including abuse and neglect. However, most studies treat mental health as static, overlooking its daily variability and dynamic influences. The findings presented are drawn from an intensive longitudinal study of dementia caregivers, using daily diary surveys to capture fluctuations in mental health. The study recruited community-dwelling family caregivers through social media, caregiver organizations, and clinical partners. Data were collected online via REDCap, with a focus on daily emotional regulation, social isolation, depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. Multi-level and time-varying effect modeling were applied to identify patterns and risk pathways.

Key Findings:

1. Daily Stressors: Higher-than-average daily stress related to dementia behavioral symptoms increased the odds of emotional dysregulation.
2. Social Isolation: Elevated daily perceptions of social isolation were linked to greater emotional dysregulation.
3. Emotional Dysregulation: Higher daily emotional dysregulation was associated with increased odds of depression-related symptoms.

These results highlight the dynamic nature of caregiver mental health, where daily variations influence emotional responses and associated risks for mistreatment. Daily fluctuations in caregiver mental health provide a valuable lens to understand elder mistreatment risk. Increased variability may serve as an early warning signal for harmful behaviors. Incorporating repeated screenings to track daily mental health could enable timely, targeted interventions. Such approaches could better align caregiver support with dynamic, real-world needs. This research underscores the need for more intensive longitudinal studies to explore the interplay between daily mental health variability and other risk and protective factors. Future studies should focus on identifying modifiable targets for intervention and refining screening tools to account for dynamic mental health states. By integrating these insights into elder care practices, researchers and practitioners can enhance care quality and safety while mitigating the risks of mistreatment. In conclusion, dynamic assessments of caregiver mental health offer a transformative approach to understanding and preventing elder mistreatment. By enabling routine monitoring to identify early warning signals, this research lays the groundwork for just-in-time interventions that enhance caregiver well-being and reduce risks of mistreatment. These findings have the potential to improve outcomes for both caregivers and care recipients, shaping future practices, policies, and support.

This research summary is part of a series sponsored by the NAPSA Research to Practice Interest Group. The purpose of this research summary is to provide direct access to findings in order to enhance practice and clarify policy choices.

Practice & Policy Implications (e.g.: How can this research inform the Adult Protective Services field? What additional data is needed? What may be possible next steps?) (500 word max)

This research on caregiver mental health highlights the need for dynamic, real-time approaches to identify and mitigate elder mistreatment risks. Adult Protective Services (APS) can leverage these findings to improve their practices, better support caregivers, and enhance the safety and well-being of care recipients.

Implications:

1. **Dynamic Screening Tools:** Current APS assessments are typically static, focusing on one-time evaluations of caregiver mental health. Incorporating dynamic tools like smartphone-based mood trackers or daily diary surveys would enable APS workers to monitor fluctuations in caregiver mental health over time. This approach could help identify high-risk periods and enable preemptive interventions before mistreatment occurs.
2. **Risk Prediction Models:** Using dynamic predictive models based on daily variations in stress, emotional regulation, and social isolation could improve APS's ability to identify caregivers at risk. These models could inform the design of individualized support plans, addressing caregivers' unique challenges.
3. **Caregiver Training and Resources:** Caregivers often lack the tools to manage their own mental health. APS can play a key role by providing caregivers with accessible resources to enhance their coping strategies, including self-monitoring techniques, peer support networks, and access to mental health professionals.
4. **Integration with Healthcare Systems:** Policies encouraging APS and healthcare system collaboration could streamline caregiver monitoring. For instance, mental health screenings conducted in healthcare settings could complement APS assessments, creating a more comprehensive view of caregiver well-being.
5. **Community Support Funding:** Policymakers can incentivize community organizations to provide respite care, caregiver training, and mental health services. These resources can reduce caregiver stress, promote emotional regulation, and decrease the likelihood of mistreatment.

Additional Data Needs:

1. **Cultural Variations:** More research is needed to understand how cultural factors influence caregiver mental health and elder mistreatment risk. For example, exploring how social support systems vary by culture can inform culturally tailored interventions.
2. **Technology Solutions:** Evaluating the feasibility of mobile apps and wearable devices for real-time caregiver mental health tracking is critical for scalable, cost-effective solutions.

Further Reading

Pickering, C. E. Z., Yefimova, M., Maxwell, C., Puga, F., & Sullivan, T. (2020). Daily Context for Abusive and Neglectful Behavior in Family Caregiving for Dementia. *The Gerontologist*, 60(3), 483–493. <https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnz110>

Browning, W. R., Yildiz, M., Hernandez Chilatra, J. A., Yefimova, M., Maxwell, C. D., Sullivan, T. P., Winstead, V., & Pickering, C. E. Z. (2024). Mechanisms Underlying the Use of Abusive and Neglectful Behaviors in Dementia Caregiving: The Role of Caregiver Mental Health. *Research in gerontological nursing*, 17(5), 227–236. <https://doi.org/10.3928/19404921-20240808-01>

Prepared By



Frank Puga, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, School of Nursing
University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB)
Email: fpuga@uab.edu

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