

WORK & FAMILY

Companies Help Employees Cope With Caring for Parents

Ann Brewster had been caring for her aged parents for years before she realized the demands were eroding her health.

Shuttling them to doctors' appointments, rushing home from work to take them dinner, coping with her mother's disorientation—all were taking a toll. Gradually, Ms.



By Sue Shellenbarger

Brewster, a financial analyst at International Business Machines in Austin, Texas, noticed she was increasingly tense, and sometimes sinking into confusion herself. Feeling isolated and facing "enormous" stress,

Ms. Brewster tried a new kind of elder-care benefit from her employer: a caregiver-wellness program.

Companies have long seen the elder-care burden as a productivity problem; the focus has been on helping workers find services for their family members, and then getting the employees back to work. Now, in the first shift in elder-care benefits in years, a few employers are offering elder-care programs aimed at the health and well-being of the workers themselves. By encouraging workers who also have elder-care duties to take better care of themselves, employers hope not only to raise productivity, but to scale down health-care costs.

Raytheon offers employee caregiver seminars on self-care and emotional support. At Nike and Intel, officials are offering a program called Powerful Tools for Caregiv-

ers, says Kathy Shannon, a manager at Legacy Health Systems, Portland, Ore., which developed the program.

IBM, Exxon Mobil and Texas Instruments have funded development of an online version of Powerful Tools through the American Business Collaboration, a non-profit, says Debbie Phillips, a vice president at WFD, a Newton, Mass., consultant to the group. The six-week Web course teaches relaxation, caregiving skills and help dealing with doctors and family.

Texas Instruments sees "a potential payoff," not only in productivity, but in employee well-being, says Betty Purkey, manager, work-life strategies. "This is a natural way to think about wellness."

Underlying these efforts is research showing that certain skills training, counseling and social-support programs can slash caregivers' depression by half and sharply improve their quality of life. The stresses of caregiving can have a deadly impact, raising caregiver mortality rates 63% above that of non-caregivers, based on a four-year University of Pittsburgh study of 819 people over age 65. But training caregivers in problem-solving, nursing skills and stress-management techniques slashed depression rates to 13% from 23% in a control group, says a study of 642 people by Arizona State University psy-

chology professor David W. Coon and others.

A study of 49 participants in the online Powerful Tools course, by Daniel Kuhn, an Alzheimer's Association executive in Chicago, and others, showed sharp and lasting improvements in caregivers' exercise, relaxation, resili-

ency and self-reported health. The program "may play a role in lowering health-care costs," the study says.

After taking the course through IBM, Ms. Brewster says she posted its stress-reduction tips at her desk, to remind her to plan reading for plea-

sure or other relaxation. And she learned how to avoid conflict with her mother when the older woman loses her grip on reality.

At IBM, Powerful Tools will be expanded internationally, says Maria Ferris, director, work-force diversity programs. Mather LifeWays Institute on Aging, a Chicago non-profit that distributes the program, is talking with a half-dozen more interested companies, says David Lindeman, a vice president.

In other initiatives, Ceridian, an employee-assistance and work-life services provider, next month will roll out monthly telephone support groups for caregivers, including skills training and stress relief, says Jennifer Piliero, product manager.

At Raytheon, the caregiver seminars were developed by United Behavioral Health, a San Francisco employee-assistance provider. Karen McCune, a vice president at United Behavioral, says the company is seeing a sharp rise in employer demand.

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Getting Help

To find support for elder care:

- Area aging agency: at www.eldercare.gov
Cooperative extension service: at www.csrees.usda.gov, click on 'local extension office'
Red Cross chapter: listed at www.redcross.org

