

# Caregiver Support

The role of caregiver is a very difficult role to fill. It can be demanding, overwhelming, confusing, and thankless. If you are in this role, know that you are not alone. An estimated 30% of healthcare is currently being delivered by informal caregivers at home: husbands, wives, sons, daughters, friends, and/or extended family members. Caregivers have many demands on their time and energy which leaves little time left to live their own lives. Because of your caregiving duties, you may be stressed out, feeling guilty, or concerned about how you are going to handle future care giving needs.

## Seek Help Early

It is good that you are looking to our website to see if we can be of service to you and the one who is under your care. It is important to seek help early, to investigate your options and know your resources in the community. If your loved one has been diagnosed as having 6 months or less to live, we will be the agency that will best serve your needs. If you are caring for someone who is chronically ill and not yet ready for Hospice services, it is important that you get some support and resources for yourself so as to avoid burnout.

## Educate Yourself

Educate yourself about the disease or disability you are working with, its progression and how to adapt to the various stages. Learn about the losses to come so they will not be unexpected. There are so many losses inherent in the caregiving process. Being armed with the knowledge of what to expect will make the inevitable changes a bit easier to manage. Educate yourself about the process of caregiving and what options in the community may assist you as the caregiver. Support groups, educational seminars, respite options - these are all important resources.

## Plan for the future

Though your loved one may be sick and maybe even dying, you will live on and need to make some preparations for that time. Good planning includes preparing **Advance Directives**. All people should make their health care wishes clear and decide who will make health care decisions for them should they become unable to do so. Though this is a difficult conversation to have, it is imperative in order to avoid potentially difficult situations in the future. There are many Advance Directives (Health Care Proxy, Living Will, Do Not Resuscitate Order, MOLST form). Do your research, consult a lawyer or feel free to call Niagara Hospice for more information. It is important that a caregiver be secure in knowing the medical wishes of the person for whom they are entrusted to make decisions.

Be sure to have **Power of Attorney** so that you are armed with the legal rights to assist with financial issues. Yet another way to plan ahead is to get information on alternate plans of care, research Nursing Homes in the area and start filling out placement papers before they are needed. Even if the Nursing Home is never needed, knowing that it is an option can take a lot of weight off one's shoulders.

## **Take Care of Yourself**

It is imperative that you care for yourself emotionally, recognize the hidden grief component of your anger, anxiety, guilt and depression. You will adapt emotionally so as to survive but the feelings of grief will go on and manifest itself in adaptive or maladaptive ways. Be aware of yourself and your history; know how you have traditionally coped with difficult situations because that is probably how you cope with this one. Is it healthy and constructive for you or is it destructive and unhealthy? Please seek help if you need help in establishing more positive coping mechanisms.

Have a good relationship with your family doctor; is he or she open and willing to listen and understand? It is important that you **take care of your own health** when you are a care giver. It is easy to ignore your own needs and focus on the care of your sick loved one but if you don't care for yourself, you will not be able to fulfill the role of care *giver*. **Establish good communication with all your health care providers**, yours and those of your loved one.

## **Build a support network.**

Try to find one or two people or more that you can really trust with your feelings and talk to them on a genuine level about what you are going through. Perhaps you can even find a local support group with others who are going through the same things. To avoid burnout and thus be unable to fulfill your caregiver duties, it is so important to find someone to talk with and discuss your feelings. If needed, seek out a professional counselor if you are unable to find or trust someone in your friend circle. So find a trusted friend, a professional, your Clergy person, a social worker, psychologist or even your nurse or doctor. Many of the professionals in your life are often trained to provide counseling on care giving issues or can direct you where to go to find what you need.

Finally, set **realistic goals**. Don't try to be a super hero, you are human and incapable of doing everything all the time. Determine your priorities and ask others for help when needed. Above all, take one day at a time. Both you and the person you are caring for will benefit once you learn your limits and how to meet your own needs.

Try to **remember to laugh!** It is all so very serious I know, but when you are a care giver, humor may reduce caregiver stress. Humor therapy is defined as the use of humor for the relief of physical or emotional pain and stress. Humor is a coping mechanism that a caregiver may use repeatedly or in the 'heat of the moment'. When a situation with the care receiver has gone awry, laughter may be the best medicine. Humor will promote relaxation and make a difficult situation seem more manageable.

There is so much more to being a care giver than discussed above, so many complicated emotions, so many demands on your time and so many unanswered questions. Please know that you do not have to go through this alone, there are many resources out there to help you, many which are free. Please do not hesitate to call us if you need further information or have any questions. We are here for you, our community.