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Canada's
Family Guide to **Home Health Care & Wellness**

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Avoiding caregiver burnout

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Avoiding caregiver burnout



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According to the Canadian Caregiver Coalition, around four to five million people in Canada care for a chronically ill, disabled or elderly family member. For many, this is in addition to raising kids and holding down a full-time job.

Family members are often tasked with the vital role of ensuring that their elderly parents receive the quality care they need and deserve. And family members are essential when it comes to ensuring loved

ones live a long and happy life, as they are most familiar with their loved ones' medicine regimes, treatments and dietary and exercise needs. Caregiving is not an easy task and, with all of the demands on their time, many people experience burnout.

Don't go it alone

Providing a significant amount of care is both physically and emotionally taxing. Family members who care for their loved ones typically have no formal training, leaving them more vulnerable to the resulting stresses and strains.

For example, a study published in the *Journal of Immunology* reported that looking after someone with Alzheimer's disease can shorten the caregiver's life by four to eight years. In addition, a 2007 review from the Alzheimer's Association found that over 40 per cent of caregivers experience high levels of emotional stress. Unfortunately, many family members do not recognise early enough that the hard choices and overall responsibilities they take on are as much a cause of caregiver burnout as the physical tasks such as bathing or dressing.

Protect your health

In short, many family caregivers are at risk. The number one thing caregivers can do to protect their own health is to closely monitor their stress levels. High stress levels have been

Beat the burnout blues

Put the kibosh on burnout with just a few adjustments. Here's a test our friends at Veterans Affairs Canada suggest you take to identify your risk.

Answer true or false to the following statements:

- I am always tired.
- I get sick more often than I used to.
- I have gained/lost weight unintentionally.
- I suffer from back pain and headaches, and often feel depressed.
- I don't have time for myself anymore.
- I have recently given up hobbies and lost contact with friends.
- I experience irrational outbursts.
- I worry about not having enough money.
- I feel I don't have enough knowledge or experience to give proper care.

If you answered "true" to a significant number of these questions then you are probably close to experiencing caregiver burnout. It's time to seek some help. Turn to your family doctor, friends and family, and caregiver respite services to get yourself some time out.

Source: Veterans Affairs



shown to lower resistance to disease and can lead to fatigue, depression and even burnout. Learning effective coping methods is one of the secrets to keeping your head above water. Check out the following helpful ideas:

Make the most of "me" time

Time spent away from caregiving needs to be focused on something that can keep you centred. If time is limited, try an activity such as yoga or meditation.

Be a joiner

There are a number of support networks for caregivers, such as therapy or discussion groups (see sidebar). These can be found in some workplaces, at local senior centres or via associations such as the Alzheimer Society of Canada and Parkinson Society Canada. Sharing your fears and concerns in an open discussion with others can go a long way toward combating depression.

Stay fit

A big part of the solution is prevention. This means taking care of yourself—get some exercise, eat healthy foods and stay socially connected. If you have a medical condition, you may want to chat with a physiotherapist or occupational therapist about your options.

Ask for help

Families facing complicated situations that require difficult decisions should consult with a geriatric care manager or their family doctor. Let's say there's disagreement among siblings about placing a parent in assisted living. An objective outsider can help family members arrive at workable solutions when emotions might otherwise get in the way.

Hire a helper

To give caregivers a break, consider hiring an aide for a few hours a day or just on week-ends. People don't feel guilty when they take on a nanny for their children, and there is no shame in employing a caregiver for an elderly patient.

Watch for warning signs

Keep alert to the symptoms of depression in yourself and other caregivers. These include

Join a support group

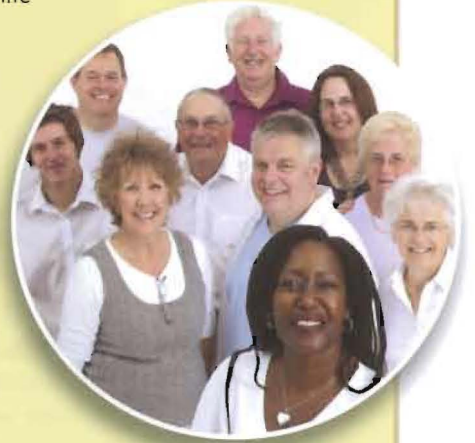
I'm not the only one

Belonging to a support group can help you to provide better care and live an easier and more enjoyable life. Self-help groups can be a great support and source of advice regarding what to expect and where to get help.

What can you take away from a support group?

- Feeling less isolated, knowing others share similar problems
- Ideas and effective ways to cope
- A new sense of control over your life
- Information about the best community resources, care alternatives and so on
- Networking connections
- The opportunity to joke and laugh about your circumstances with people who really understand and won't judge
- A chance to cry and complain without others making you feel guilty about your own needs and pain
- Time to focus on just you
- Respite from caregiving tasks
- Help with brainstorming solutions to your problems
- Hope as you listen to how others have coped
- Stress relief through emotional venting
- Validation by affirming your valued role and identity
- Easier acceptance of the institutional placement of a care recipient
- Comfort during the grieving process

Source: The Complete Canadian Eldercare Guide



emotional lows and highs, feelings of isolation, low energy or a very short temper. If you're an outside person looking in, a sudden change in the personality of a caregiver can indicate someone who badly needs a break.

Workplace issues

If you find yourself taking time off to provide care, having to take phone calls at work relating to your parents and turning down projects or promotions, it may be time to speak to your employer about making adjustments to your schedule. ●



Kathy Johnson, PhD, CMC, is a Certified Care Manager and Co-Founder of Home Care Assistance.

“Man who stand on hill with mouth open will wait a long time for roast duck to drop in.”

Confucius