



Family Caregivers of British Columbia

The Importance of Empathy in Caregiving

Empathy plays an important role in caregiving, especially during stressful times. During those times family caregivers can often feel frustrated, irritated and resentful. The person they are caring for may seem to be “not cooperating” or “be too demanding”.

Empathy is defined as “the ability to understand another person’s circumstances, point of view, thoughts, and feelings. When experiencing empathy, you are able to understand someone else’s internal experiences.” Empathy is different than sympathy. With sympathy you feel sorry for someone, but you don’t necessarily understand what they are feeling. With empathy you are placing yourself in that person’s circumstances and reflecting on their thoughts and feelings.

When my siblings and I were caring for my dad who had colon cancer, I discovered that I was a lot less irritated and frustrated with him and the situation when I was able to put myself in my dad’s shoes. I imagined what it must be like to be in pain, to be facing my own imminent death, to be dependent on others in order to do the simplest daily tasks such as eating or going to the bathroom, to have total strangers (home support) providing personal care to me and to have no privacy. I couldn’t go watch TV when I wanted to or go outside for a walk. I could no longer eat what I enjoyed because it made me nauseous. The people who came to visit me were often uncomfortable and didn’t know what to do or say.

When I put myself in my dad’s shoes and realized everything that he was experiencing I was able to be a lot more patient and caring. I recognized that if it was me in that same situation I would likely be demanding and grumpy as well. I realized that he was embarrassed by his situation and by his complete dependence on others. This realization shifted my view of the whole situation. I recognized he wasn’t trying to make things difficult or to make more work for us.

In caregiving empathy can expand beyond the caregiver having empathy for the care recipient’s situation. Empathy can also help the care recipient and other family members to acknowledge and understand what the primary family caregiver is experiencing as well. What might it be like for your son or daughter to be providing care to you while also caring for their own family and going to work each day? How might your spouse be dealing with the awareness that he or she may be alone soon? What about your sister who has temporarily put her life on hold in order to move in with your elderly parents? How would you feel and behave in these situations if it were you?

Everyone has the right to their feelings whatever they may be. This however does not give them free range to express them in a way that is mean or cruel to another person. But by simply being curious and recognizing the feelings that might be underlying someone else’s behavior we can change our own emotional reaction to their comments or behaviors. We are less likely to be triggered and simply react.

By Barbara Small, Program Development Coordinator, Family Caregivers’ Network Society