



Family Caregivers of British Columbia

Compassion Fatigue and Family Caregivers

Are you feeling too tired to care? Being a family caregiver can affect you physically, mentally and emotionally, sometimes without you even realizing that it is. You may become irritable, depressed, have trouble sleeping or feel completely unable to cope anymore.

Compassion fatigue occurs when family caregivers begin to take on the pain and suffering of the person for whom they are caring. Caregivers experiencing compassion fatigue have a difficult time maintaining a healthy balance between concerns for their family member and staying objective. They continually push themselves harder, eventually becoming completely burnt out.

Some caregivers are caught up in the trap of trying to enable their family member or friend to continue on as if nothing were different with their health or their life. Doing all they can to keep everything as “normal” as possible. But it simply isn’t anymore.

Compassion fatigue can be detrimental to both you and the person for whom you are caring. Feeling high levels of stress over long periods of time will definitely affect your health, your attitude and your ability to cope with your daily responsibilities, both caregiving and otherwise.

Some of the causes of compassion fatigue are:

- Not asking for help and seldom taking a break
- Having high expectations of yourself
- Working hard to make everything ideal for the person you are caring for
- A difficulty saying "no"
- Consistently putting other people’s needs ahead of your own
- Feeling as though you are the only person capable of providing the care needed
- Ignoring your own health concerns

Family caregivers can prevent or reduce compassion fatigue by:

- Letting go and accepting help. One person cannot do everything by themselves. Recognize that someone else might not provide care exactly as you would, but many people can still provide appropriate care as needed.
- Scheduling breaks and quiet time for you. This is essential and will allow you to be a more effective caregiver longer. You cannot take care of someone else without replenishing your own inner resources as well.
- Making use of respite so that you can take some time away from caregiving. Respite care could be provided by a family member, friend, volunteer or healthcare provider. The care recipient will benefit as well through the opportunity to spend some time with a new face. Even an hour or two will help. Just ensure you use it regularly.
- Taking care of your own health as well - eat healthily, get regular sleep and participate in activities you find stress relieving. Visit the doctor for your own health concerns.
- Defining the boundaries of what you are prepared and able to do. You do not have to say yes to all requests. Maybe there is someone else who is actually better qualified or equipped to carry out some of the responsibilities.
- Joining a caregiver's support group and share with others who are going through similar situations.
- Keeping a good sense of humour and finding some laughter in the little situations that happen throughout your day.

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