



## Family Caregivers of British Columbia

### Family Dynamics and Caregiving

Providing care for a family member can bring out the best and the worst in everyone involved. People can come together to support each other or the stress can lead to frustration and conflict between family members.

Past family dynamics and family roles often re-surface when dealing with the stresses of caregiving. All those old issues and unresolved tensions that you thought you had resolved can often re-emerge.

It is important to keep in mind that everyone will respond to the situation in their own unique way. Frustration can occur if you expect everyone else to feel or act the same as you. Everyone in the family comes with a different history within the family, a different relationship with the person who is ill and a different comfort level with illness and the associated emotions.

Also, family members each have their own strengths. Some will excel at the personal care aspect of caregiving while others cringe from that. They may better help by doing the housework, gardening, repairs or dealing with finances. Rather than forcing everyone to do everything – let people work in the areas where they excel.

Even when two people are both doing the same duty, they may still do it differently. How you provide personal care to your spouse may be different than how his sister does when she relieves you. Just because it is different does not mean that it is wrong. Ask yourself whether it is really worth butting heads over.

Family meetings are important for keeping everyone up-to-date regarding the care-recipient's health as well as to delegate duties. The goal at these meetings is not to resolve long-time family issues, but rather to ensure everyone is on the same team and to sort out what needs to be done. It can also be an opportunity for current concerns to be aired and miscommunications to be cleared up.

Here are some suggestions for how family members can work together when caregiving:

- Start early. Clarify tasks and responsibilities. Be concrete and specific and ensure everyone has interpreted the plan the same.
- Have one person (usually the primary caregiver) be responsible for coordinating what needs to be done and for keeping family members in the loop.
- Let others know their help is both wanted and needed.

- Be realistic in your expectations as to what each person is able to do.
- Express appreciation to each other for the help each is able to provide.
- Expect and accept differences of opinion and reactions and find ways to compromise. Keep in mind that everyone has the right to their own feelings and point of view. You can agree to disagree and still complete the caregiving tasks as needed.
- Take a moment to recognize what is old-time conflict and what is related to the current situation. Try to put aside long-time grudges at least for the time being so everyone has the energy to deal with the current situation.

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