



## Family Caregivers of British Columbia

### Reducing Caregiver Isolation

One of the major issues that family caregivers experience is social isolation. Even caregivers who have strong social networks can feel isolated at times. At workshops when I tell caregivers that there are over 94,000 family caregivers in the Capital Regional District and one million in BC, they are often shocked. Although they know on one level that they aren't alone, many feel like they are the only one going through these challenges and no one else will understand.

In the VON Caregiver Risk Factor Report (2008) social isolation was defined as the lack of social activities and relationships aside from that with the care recipient. It was identified as the highest risk factor experienced by family caregivers and the most frequently observed risk.

Some of the factors that contribute to family caregivers feeling isolated are:

- Not self-identifying as family caregivers, therefore, not accessing services or connecting with other caregivers
- A lack of knowledge of community resources that could provide support
- Other family members live at a geographical distance
- The time devoted to caregiving can cause caregivers to feel isolated from friends, family and a social life and they are too tired to go out
- The care recipient's health may prevent the caregiver from leaving them alone or there is no respite available
- The declining health of the caregiver brought on by caregiver burnout
- Family and friends that don't understand the situation and don't want to talk about it at length
- Many caregivers don't ask for help. They believe they should be able to do everything themselves. When caregivers are isolated it can also make it difficult for others to know when to intervene.

Below are some ways caregivers can reduce their isolation:

- Sharing your experiences with other caregivers at a support group is a great way to fight the feeling that you are the only person in the world with these problems
- With the internet there is always someone to connect with 24-7 through on-line discussions forums. You can gain support by linking with other caregivers.

- Attend caregiver workshops and tele-workshops to learn skills and to connect with others in a similar situation.
- Ask family members or friends to help with some of the day-to-day tasks. Contact community organizations that provide respite care and services for family caregivers. This will provide both you and the care recipient with opportunities to interact with other people and will provide you with a break so you can connect with others.
- It is very easy to let friendships and other connections fade away once the demands of caregiving take over. To stay healthy make time to stay in contact with others even if just briefly by email or a quick call. You are there to provide support to your ill family member, but you need a support network as well. Doing so will make you a better caregiver.
- Attend events at the activity centres in your community, such as New Horizons, Silver Threads or at your local recreation centre.

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