

# **BUILDING YOUR PERSONAL RESILIENCE:**

**Strategies for Family Caregivers**



**Family Caregivers  
of British Columbia**

— Let us help —

# Welcome

An African proverb says,

“If you want to go fast,  
go alone. If you want  
to go far, go together.””

Most of us are able to go fast from time to time. We can push the boundaries of our energy and burn the candle at both ends. Then once the urgency is over, we return to a more balanced way of life; at least until the next sprint is required. But what happens when your sprint turns into a marathon? And what happens if you have to run another marathon the next week?

If you are reading this, then chances are you are taking part in the marathon of caregiving. It's not usually something any of us anticipate, sign up for or train for, but it's the new normal of our life. Whether it's caring for an adult child with a disability or mental health challenge, a partner with a chronic disease, or an elderly parent with dementia, family caregivers in Canada represent 28 per cent of our population.<sup>1</sup>

A family caregiver's role spans an average of six years, providing an average of 11 hours of care per week; with 89 per cent of caregivers caring for over a year. More than 60 per cent of caregivers have been providing care for at least three years, especially when their loved one has a chronic disease.<sup>2</sup> Family caregivers often have other competing demands – 60 per cent were working and 28 per cent were raising children in 2012.<sup>3</sup> We suspect this percentage has increased significantly over the past five years.

Caregivers often talk about feeling stressed about time and money, as well as being physically and emotionally tired and overwhelmed with no time for themselves on a day to day basis. In the professional world, this is referred to as caregiver burden: “The extent to which caregivers perceive that caregiving has had an adverse effect on their emotional, social, financial, physical, and spiritual functioning.”<sup>4</sup> Different thresholds exist for what causes caregiver burden. Caregivers also express positive thoughts about their role and how much it means to them.

**Resilience** is one way to help decrease caregiver burden. It helps make the harder parts of caregiving more do-able. Building resilience helps caregivers sustain their health and capacity to care, both for themselves and others. When caregivers feel resilient, it expands their capacity to move through difficult situations that are part of their caring role and reduces their susceptibility to stress.<sup>5</sup>



# Case Study: Meet Marilyn

According to George Vaillant, resilient caregivers resemble “a twig with a fresh, green living core. When twisted out of shape, such a twig bends, but it does not break; instead, it springs back and continues growing.”



## How Resilient are you Feeling as a Caregiver?

To learn more about your resilience, answer this [questionnaire](#).

Marilyn is 55 years old, works part-time in retail and has two teens at home. She currently cares for her partner who has chronic pain and a brain injury from a motor vehicle accident. She feels like the “linchpin” in her family and is the case manager for her partner and for her two children. She dances between respecting her partner’s desire to be autonomous and independent and picking up the pieces when things don’t go the way they hoped. While her two children are helpful, they still require her support, whether it’s attending their piano recital, helping with homework or reminding them to do their laundry! She’ll be the first to tell you her life isn’t easy or what she imagined it to be. In the next breath, Marilyn will tell you how thankful she is to be able to care for her partner and to see her children step up, pitching in and being caring and compassionate towards their father.

She shares that caregiving is rarely static or easy; nor is it black and white. Some days are easier and better than others. Over time, Marilyn’s perceptions about caregiving have shifted; rather than seeing caregiving as a trap, she has started seeing it as an opportunity. After a few challenging situations, she’s finding ways to add to her toolbox of caregiving strategies – one of which is becoming more resilient.

# Resiliency: What Does It Really Mean?

## Resilience isn't just one thing, rather it's:

- ♥ how we adapt in a healthy way to stress
- ♥ how we recover or 'bounce back' from a difficult situation
- ♥ how we expand our capacity to grow from an experience or "bouncing forward" <sup>6</sup>

Resilience is a process and an outcome. We are not born with resilience, it's a learned skill. It varies over time as demands, circumstances and levels of maturity change and it can be developed through behaviour, thoughts and actions. Similar to caregiving being unique to the individual, so are approaches to building resiliency. <sup>7</sup>

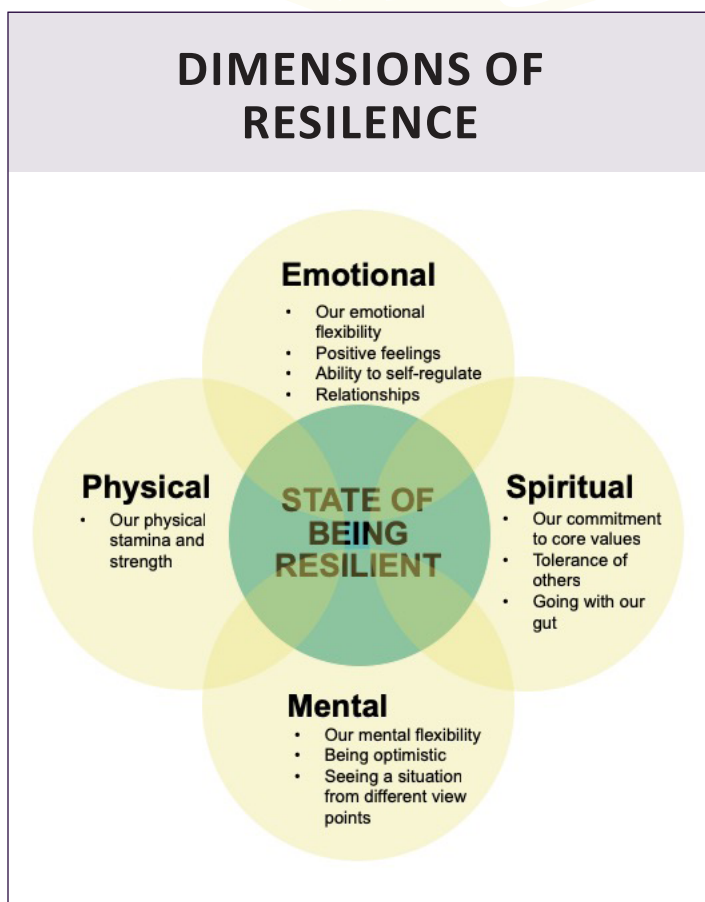
Rollin McCraty sees resilience as a function of how we self-manage and effectively use our energy across four domains:

**PHYSICAL,  
EMOTIONAL,  
MENTAL &  
SPIRITUAL<sup>8</sup>**

When we are feeling physically resilient, we feel strong with good stamina. This translates into having enough energy during the day to keep up with the physical aspects of caregiving. For some caregivers, this will also mean having enough energy to be active – in whatever shape or form that takes. Emotional resiliency is shown through one's ability to be flexible and adaptive, particularly through emotional storms which are inevitable in the caregiving journey. In this way, people are able to access positive feelings (e.g. gratitude and loving-kindness toward oneself and others), self-regulate their internal experience (thoughts, feelings and behaviours), and nurture strong relationships.

When dimensions of resilience align, we are considered to be in a state of resiliency. And they tend to feed each other. For example, when we're feeling we have enough physical energy, it often translates into feeling more positive about ourselves and our relationships. This in turn supports feeling less stressed, frustrated, and angry all of which deplete our resources resulting in lower resiliency.

But let's be clear and transparent. Being and building resilience is not easy. This process is very complex, dynamic and it takes energy. We all react differently to stress, and strategies that work for one person to cultivate resilience may not work for another.



# Strategies to Build Your Personal Resilience

It can be easy to feel like running away from your role as a caregiver. We face ongoing road bumps like navigating the health care system, dealing with a difficult diagnosis, helping to care for someone who depends on you and working through with the unexpected stressors that come with every day living.

Wouldn't it be amazing if there was a way to create immunity to stress in the same way we take vitamins and get adequate rest to boost our immunity to illness?

Give your brain a chance! Old dogs can learn new tricks! Dennis Charney and Steven Southwick<sup>9</sup>, two experts in the field of resilience, explain that people can train their brain to be more resilient by harnessing their stressors and using them to their advantage. Being resilient doesn't mean you will avoid stress. It does mean you can better adapt and recover from it.

## Here are some ways to support and develop your resilience.

**Cultivate a positive outlook.** We don't want to sidestep the difficult emotions or feelings that come with caregiving. Being mindful of and acknowledging your inner experience is an important part of resiliency. Accepting that life is imperfect and to hold space and comfort for ourselves in the face of difficult times is a fine balance. Research also shows the importance of not staying too long with difficult thoughts and working towards a long-term perspective.

**Reframe your stressful experiences.** Caregiving and highly stressful events seem to go hand in hand. We can't change past stressful events; however, we can learn to change how we interpret and respond to them. Similar to optimism, we can alter how an event is perceived and the meaning it can take on by taking it in, understanding and finding acceptance and recovering from it. It's very much a process of transformation.

**Create a network of connections.** A primary factor in resilience is having strong connections with family and



friends who are supportive and caring. Very few of us can “go at it alone,” and having relationships with friends or organizations (like Family Caregivers of BC) can boost your emotional strength for the marathon of caregiving. Plus, you'll feel validated by helping others in a similar situation deal with their own stressors.

**Nurture your inner superhero.** Holding ourselves with self-compassion, believing in our abilities and knowing our strengths helps us bounce back from stress and challenging situations.

**Make friends with reality.** Change is a part of caregiving. Caregivers often reflect that being a caregiver wasn't in their life plan and with that came a shift in perspective and expectations. Resilient caregivers often provide advice to others, “Accept circumstances that can't be changed. Then turn your attention to what circumstances can be changed and focus on them.”

**Remind yourself of where your moral compass points are** but don't lose sight of where you want to go. Strengthening our core beliefs and finding support in our spiritual beliefs help us be more resilient. While altruism (the act of putting someone else's needs ahead of ours) is strongly related to resilience, it doesn't and shouldn't mean at all costs. It may feel selfish, but if you are going to care for someone else, prioritize taking care of yourself. Put on your oxygen mask first: have a snack, go for a walk, get out into nature, meet a friend or take a nap.

**Prioritize your physical well-being.** Regular exercise is one of the keys to cleansing your mind of stress. Acknowledge where you are at – whether it's walking around the block or going for a walk or hike in nature. Research shows physical activity is linked to better mood, improved

cognition, better self-regulation of emotional responses and improved immunity. Being active may seem like “just one more thing” when you're faced with caregiving. Try seeing it as a welcome reprieve and a place to keep your physical resilience a priority.

**Create meaning in your caregiving role.** Finding positive meaning and value (even if it seems small) in your role adds to positive overall health. Having and holding a sense of purpose in caregiving is also associated with resilience. For some, it's knowing they are strengthening the relationship between themselves and the care recipient or giving back to the person being cared for. For others, their caregiving role can fulfill a sense of greater purpose in life, they are proud of their skills and desire a better outcome for the person needing care.

<sup>1</sup> Statistics Canada. (2013). Portrait of caregivers, 2012. Catalogue no. 89-652 X- No.001. Ottawa, ON: Statistics Canada Social and Aboriginal Statistics Division, retrieved from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-652-x/89-652-x2013001-eng.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Statistics Canada. (2013). Portrait of caregivers, 2012. Catalogue no. 89-652 X- No.001. Ottawa, ON: Statistics Canada Social and Aboriginal Statistics Division, retrieved from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-652-x/89-652-x2013001-eng.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Statistic Canada. (2013). Portrait of caregivers, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> JAMA. 2014;311(10):1052-1059. doi:10.1001/jama.2014.304 Retrieved from <http://gfcourse.co.il/wordpress-he/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/caregiver-burden.pdf>

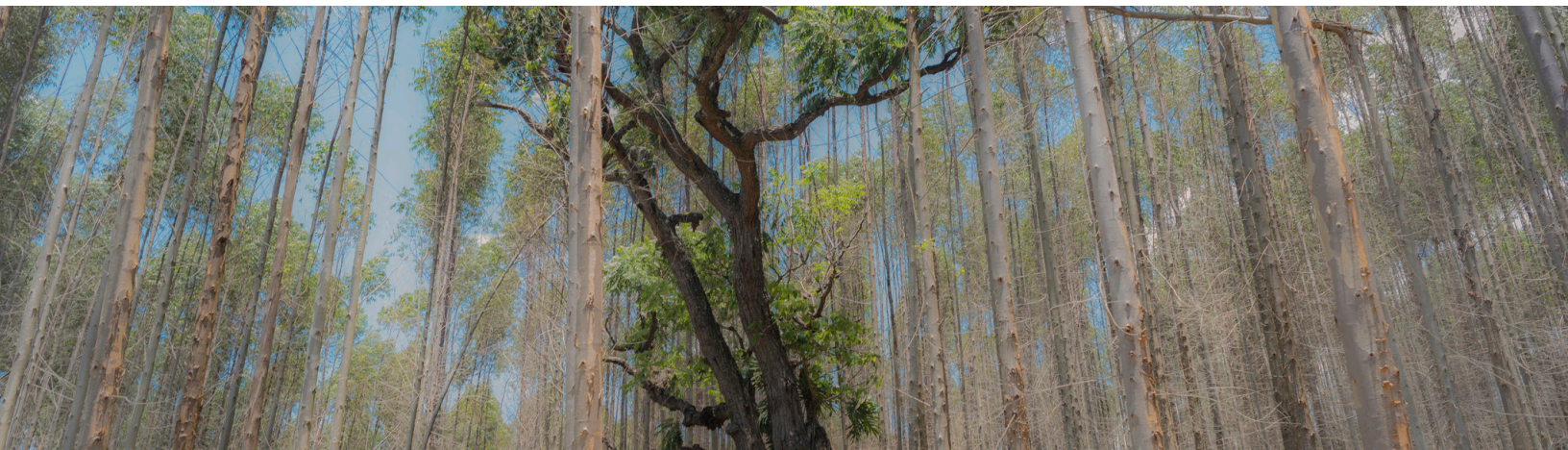
<sup>5</sup> McCraty, Rollin. (2011). Coherence: Bridging personal, social and global health. *Activitas Nervosa Superior Rediviva*. 53. 85-102

<sup>6</sup> Coon, DW (2012). Resilience and family caregiving. In *Annual Review of Gerontology & Geriatrics: Emerging Perspective on Resilience in Adulthood and Later Life* (Hayslip & Smith, eds.) New York: Springer

<sup>7</sup> (Luthar et al 2000).

<sup>8</sup> McCraty, Rollin. (2011). Coherence: Bridging personal, social and global health. *Activitas Nervosa Superior Rediviva*. 53. 85-102.

<sup>9</sup> Southwick, S. M., & Charney, D. S. (2012). *Resilience: The science of mastering life's greatest challenges*. New York, NY, US: Cambridge University Press.



“Life’s challenges are not supposed to paralyze you; they’re supposed to help you discover who you are”

— Bernice Johnson Reagan



I can't thank you enough for taking the time to speak with me and for the valuable information you have provided.

—Caregiver Support Line User

# What You Can Do Right Now

For [emotional support or questions](#) related to caregiving, call our toll-free line (BC) at 1-877-520-3267. We're available Mon-Fri, 8:30 am to 4 pm. When you call our Support Line, we listen as you share whatever is on your mind. If we feel you could benefit from more one to one support, we will refer you to our [1:1 Caregiver Coaching for more complex situations](#) — see if you qualify.

Want to learn more about how to be a caregiver? Receive information in your inbox by [signing up](#) for our newsletter, e-news and webinars. These free emails and events often cover how to build strength as a caregiver.

Join a [family caregiver support group](#): We're also continually expanding our list of community caregiver support groups around BC. [Find one near you and get together with people who "get it"](#). Learn from other family caregivers and share your advice to help others.

Visit your online Caregiver Resource Centre:

[www.familycaregiversbc.ca](http://www.familycaregiversbc.ca)

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