



Family Caregivers of British Columbia

— Let us help —

Shared Understandings: A Safe Space for Caregiver Support Groups

A Caregiver Support Group is where people come together around a mutual experience of caregiving for a family member or friend. Here, a caregiver may give and receive helpful emotional and practical support, empowering them to nurture their own well-being. This is a time for reassurance, where group members realize they are not alone.

The following `shared understandings` or `ground rules` have emerged from over 30 years of facilitating support groups for caregivers:

- ***We respect confidentiality*** – by NOT sharing personal details of other caregivers' lives and experiences, outside of the group setting. However, information and resources learned about may be used or shared with those who may benefit outside the group.
- ***We are non-judgmental*** – remembering that every individual and situation is different, we honour each caregivers' own experiences, just as they are. There is no right or wrong path, including having and expressing strong emotions, as long as they are shared in a respectful manner.
- ***We share our time together*** – making sure everyone has an opportunity to speak (or remain quiet/silent) to their own comfort level.
- ***We listen respectfully*** – focusing on each person as they share. We avoid side conversations. We turn our cells off or switch to silent and, if needed, leave the room to take a call.
- ***We do not give advice*** – instead, with permission, we can share ideas from what we have learned from personal experience. We know our own personal experiences, yet we do not know what is best for anyone else.
- ***We accept the range of human expression*** – silence, laughter and tears are ok.
- ***We speak using 'I', not 'you' language*** – since the focus of each participant's sharing is about one's own personal experience, rather than another person's life and situation.

Having a group (co)facilitator helps to embrace the shared understanding; in this model, no one person is the "expert" – the group is the source of lived experience. Our peer group model is based on volunteer facilitators, while others may use paid staff. The topics of the group are chosen by the group members. The facilitator can help spark conversation, encourage acting in accordance with the group's shared goals and understandings, keep track of time, and overall, help the group toward a safe and comfortable environment for everyone.

It can be helpful for groups to review the shared understandings at the beginning of each meeting. Feel free to edit this to suit your group and adapt it over time.