

TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

You can only help when you're healthy and have enough energy and resources. Feeling frustrated, overwhelmed, or even a bit resentful are signs that you might need some care for yourself.

Make time for yourself and your own priorities

Caregiving may seem like a full-time job, but even full-time jobs have breaks and holidays. Set aside time to focus on yourself, see family and friends, or participate in hobbies you enjoy. If you need help finding someone to care for your loved one during this time, enlist some help from other loved ones or paid home care providers or talk to your loved one's mental health care team about opportunities for respite care.

Take care of your own mental health

Caregiving can take a toll on your own well-being. It's normal to have a lot of difficult feelings when a loved one is ill—grief, loss, frustration, hopelessness, and many others. If you find it difficult to cope, seek help for yourself.

Seek support when you need it

Social support is so important. Many caregivers say that they feel isolated by their responsibilities. Connect with people who understand what you're going through and see what has helped others in similar situations. Look for groups online if you can't find caregiver support groups in your community.

PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

Thinking about the future can be stressful and frightening for any caregiver. For aging caregivers supporting a loved one who can't live independently, the future can seem particularly uncertain. Reach out for help so you can take advantage of local, provincial or territorial, and federal resources. In addition to local organizations and health care providers, you can seek assistance through national programs like Carers Canada, PLAN (Planned Lifetime Advocacy Network), and government agencies like Service Canada.

DO YOU NEED MORE HELP?

Contact a community organization like the Canadian Mental Health Association to learn more about support and resources in your area.

Founded in 1918, the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) is the most established, most extensive community mental health organization in Canada. Through a presence in hundreds of neighbourhoods across every province, CMHA provides advocacy and resources that help to prevent mental health problems and illnesses, support recovery and resilience, and enable all Canadians to flourish and thrive.

Visit the CMHA website at www.cmha.ca.

CARE FOR THE CAREGIVER



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More and more Canadians take care of friends, family members, and loved ones of all ages living with a mental health problem, whether they live together at home or not. Caring for a loved one can be rewarding, but it can also be tiring, overwhelming, confusing, and stressful. Many caregivers feel obligated to put the needs of others before their own. Yet, when you make the time to take care of yourself, you can help avoid burnout, isolation, depression, anxiety, and other problems that caregiving might bring up. Here are some tips to reduce the impact that caregiving can take.

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EDUCATE YOURSELF

Ongoing education can help you understand what's going on and build realistic and hopeful expectations. Education includes learning more about the mental health and social services available in your community and province or territory. With your loved one's permission, you can also ask their mental health care team for information and advice.

ASK YOUR LOVED ONE WHAT THEY NEED MOST

It's natural to want to help as much as you can. However, it's unrealistic to expect that you can do everything, and it might not be what your loved one needs. Building independence is an important part of recovery. It can be difficult when what your loved one says they need most is not what you think they should be focusing on. For example, if a loved one is focused on finding employment, putting a lot of effort into finding new treatment providers might not be the best use of your caregiving resources. Taking more time to listen and understand the reasons behind your loved one's priorities can help you use your energy better.

PRACTICE CLEAR COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Clear communication means that everyone can discuss their thoughts or concerns respectfully. The ingredients of clear communication include active listening without distractions, being specific, focusing on one topic at a time, and using respect and empathy in every discussion. Assertiveness can help people communicate well in difficult situations. Many community organizations offer assertiveness courses so you can practice these skills.

Be mindful of any extra barriers to good communication. For example, your loved one may find it harder to filter out distractions, may need more time to think about what they'd like to say, or may have focus or energy for a respectful conversation only at certain times of day.

Dealing with difficult thoughts, beliefs, or experiences

Mental illnesses can cause a lot of upsetting or difficult thoughts or experiences. People who experience depression may talk about feeling worthless or hopeless. People who experience an anxiety disorder may bring up unrealistic fears. People who experience episodes of psychosis may experience hallucinations (sensations that aren't real) or delusions (strong beliefs that can't possibly be true).



All of these situations can be very upsetting for caregivers. You may be frightened or confused by the things you hear. A helpful approach to these difficult statements is to simply acknowledge your loved one's feelings around the thoughts. You could say, "I can see how upset you're feeling right now. I can only imagine how scary those thoughts must feel." It's unrealistic to expect that you can solve or even fully understand what your loved one is experiencing, but the simple act of acknowledging and empathizing shows that you are listening and you care. Often, that's enough to reduce some distress.

SET HEALTHY LIMITS

It's easy to feel like you have to be there for a loved one all the time or find yourself spending more time caregiving than you'd like. Limits are a healthy part of any relationship—even more so when you are juggling a lot of different priorities. Think about your own needs, then work with everyone around you to find a solution. You could set limits around behaviours, the time that you will focus on caregiving, expectations around the home, or whatever makes sense in your situation. Part of setting limits is letting go of the idea that you can control someone else's symptoms or behaviours. You may have influence, but in the end, your own actions are the only things you have control over.