


Module 6


**The Role of Support Workers
and Self Care**



Canadian Hospice Palliative Care Association
Association canadienne de soins palliatifs

Goals

- 1) To discuss the role of the home support worker in the integrated palliative approach to care, including developing a therapeutic relationship and maintaining boundaries
- 2) To recognize the grief process of health care providers
- 3) To learn ways of coping with stress.



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**I. Role of Home Support Workers
in Hospice Palliative Care**

According to study by the University of Toronto's Joint Centre for Bioethics, people with a life-limiting illness want:

- adequate pain and symptom management
- to avoid inappropriate prolonging of dying
- a sense of control
- to relieve burden
- strong relationships with loved ones.

According to a US study, people want the following for a "good death":

- pain and symptom management
- clear decision-making
- preparation for death
- completion of life tasks
- ability to contribute to others
- affirmation of the whole person.



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Competencies of Home Support Workers

To support people with life-limiting illnesses, support workers need the following competencies:

- Understand and empathize with the person and family.
- Be present and listen to any needs or issues identified by the person or family.
- Communicate effectively with the person, family and other members of the palliative care team.
- Provide personal care and safety to the client.
- Recognize signs and symptoms of unmanaged pain.
- Recognize the process of dying and provide care in the final hours.
- Provide bereavement support.
- Self care, including managing grief and stress.



Developing a Therapeutic Relationship

Hospice palliative care is most effectively delivered by an inter-professional team of health care providers who form a therapeutic relationship – a circle of care – with the person and family.

Home support workers are key to that circle of care because they spend more time with the client, who may share information with them.

To develop a therapeutic relationship, support workers will:

- Observe the person and family, without judging.
- Ask questions to be able to understand what the person and family need.
- Shape their response to meet the person's and family's needs.
- Affirm the person's and family's values and choices.



Maintaining Boundaries

A key part of the therapeutic relationship is keeping a healthy distance and maintaining boundaries. Boundaries help support workers provide care without getting so emotionally involved or burning out.

Strategies to maintain boundaries:

- Remember you are here to support, not fix.
- Know your role and responsibilities, and communicate these clearly to the person and family.
- Be aware of and control your emotional reactions.
- Do not attempt tasks that are outside of your scope or not part of the person's care plan.
- Take care of yourself.



Signs of Blurred Boundaries

How can support workers know when they are getting too involved and blurring boundaries?

Key Signs of Blurred Boundaries:

- Experiencing very strong emotions in the caring situation.
- Feeling you are the only person who can care for the person.
- Trying to influence the person or family's decisions.

Exercise: Maintaining Boundaries

Case Study:

While on your way to visit your client who has advanced pancreatic cancer, her husband asks if you can stop at the store to pick up milk because he hasn't been able to leave his wife all day. Lately he has been asking you to stay longer than you are paid for while he runs errands and to do extra household work.

You have been caring for his wife for close to a year and think very highly of the whole family. You want to help your client's husband because he has little help and is always very nice to you.

Question:

How would you manage this situation?

II. The Support Worker's Grief

As a support worker, you will experience grief when a client dies. It is important to acknowledge that grief. Here are strategies to help cope with grief:

- Express your grief.
- Attend the person's funeral (when possible, but first check your organization's policy).
- Write a condolence letter to the person's family.
- Talk about your feelings with family, friends, colleagues and other team members.
- Talk about your feelings with your supervisor.
- Remember the person in your prayers if you are religious.

Exercise: Strategies to Cope with Grief

Scenario #1:

A person you have been visiting for a number of months died before your visit. You never had a chance to say good-bye and you feel something is unfinished. How can you resolve your unsettled feelings?

Scenario #2:

You were shocked to learn that one of your clients was found dead in his apartment. Thinking back on your previous visit, you remember him being quiet and not interested in finishing the meal you prepared. You begin thinking that maybe if you had reported the change to your supervisor, he would not have died. How do you deal with your feelings?



III. Managing Stress

Caring for people with life-limiting illnesses who are nearing death can be very stressful.

Support workers need strategies to recognize and manage stress.



Common Responses to Stress

People who are experiencing stress may experience a range of different physical, emotional or behavioural responses, including:


- Fatigue or exhaustion
- Headaches, stomach problems
- Being disillusioned with work
- Becoming negative or cynical
- Lacking patience
- Sudden mood swings, short attention span, personality changes
- Increase in sick time or lateness
- Avoiding clients
- Experiencing conflicts with others
- Changes in eating or sleeping patterns
- Abuse of substances such as alcohol or cigarettes



Strategies to Reduce Stress

To reduce stress and prevent burnout, support workers should consider the following strategies:

- Take time out
- Plan a decompression routine between work and home, such as reading a book
- Maintain good personal care – including healthy eating, exercise and sleep
- Grieve client losses – acknowledge your feelings
- Use your support system – let others around you know when you are sad
- Recognize your own limitations – set reasonable expectations and avoid being the “super” support worker.



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Exercise: Develop a Self Care Plan

Personal Exercise (not to be shared)

- Develop a self care plan
- What are your ideas for looking after yourself?
- Think about and write down the concrete things you will do to be able to implement your self care plan





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Learning Outcomes

Do you feel better able to develop a therapeutic relationship with your clients and maintain boundaries?

Are you better able to recognize and manage your own grief when a client dies?

Did you learn strategies to cope with stress?

Do you have a self care plan?



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