

Caregivers in challenging times

Not all heroes wear capes





They are the faces of heroes. Ordinary folks, who get up, kiss their family goodbye and head off to work, just like everyone does every day, right?

But in these days, many people go to work facing the very real and frightening possibility that “This job could be the death of me!”

Amid the pandemic crisis, essential front-line workers such as doctors and health care workers, staff in long term care facilities, supermarket and pharmacy staff, cleaners and delivery drivers, funeral directors and other essential services are stepping up to help their fellow Canadians. They do so even while exposing themselves to the risk of infection and the realization that even something as mundane as going to work has become “SCARY!”

That is why they are heroes. And many citizens are recognizing this by horn-honking, proclaiming “Heroes work here”. Some supply free food and coffee, and many other acknowledgments of the selfless sacrifices that are being made by so many for the sake of others.

But ask those directly involved what their daily life is like and you will hear their experience described in phrases like:

“Scary, VERY scary”;

“It’s a relentless daily battle. It is like going to war, and we’re not trained for that”; “I worry about having enough resources to do my job well”

“Every day I weigh the risks to myself, my colleagues and even to my family”

“I’m exhausted all the time, irritable, and snappy”

Not all heroes wear capes, and sadly some don’t even have sufficient masks to protect them these days.

This little guide is intended to provide some coping strategies for people on the front line. It will identify some of the challenges caregivers face, and offer some practical strategies to help others and to help ourselves.

Disasters such as health emergencies demand a massive effort in response to the psychosocial effects of catastrophic events. Caregivers give a critical contribution to their community's recovery. It requires working long hours helping people understand and manage the many physical and emotional reactions and challenges triggered by these stressful circumstances.

However, caregivers sometimes need to be reminded that such a sustained and intensive response can lead to physical and emotional wear and tear. Without conscious attention to self-care, caregivers' effectiveness and ultimately their health will suffer. With the pressures our front line workers are facing at the moment, stress and all its implications seems inevitable.

Common Sources of Stress for Caregivers in Challenging Times:

Heavy workloads

Longer hours and lower pay for a job that puts them in harm's way

Limited essential resources like PPE

Conflicting and competing priorities

Trying to live up to their clients' high expectations and/or their own

Inability or opportunity to set appropriate boundaries

Intensive care for others at the expense of self-care

Pushing themselves (or being pushed by others) too hard

Mental and physical demands

Time pressures due to multiple added responsibilities

Media requests

Political and organizational pressures

Be Aware of Signs of Stress

Caregivers are usually alert to the stresses of people they support. They are not, however, always as attentive to the stress and fatigue that can slowly surface in their own lives, and often need to be reminded of stress symptoms that may affect them.

Ask yourself, in the last couple of months, have you noticed more of the following symptoms, reactions or behaviours?

Physical/Behavioural Reactions:

Fatigue, loss of appetite, difficulty falling asleep, restlessness, headaches, changes in sleeping, increased blood pressure, changes in eating habits, increased susceptibility to colds, flu, infection, change in libido, in smoking habits, or alcohol or drug consumption.

Emotional Reactions:

Feeling helpless, overwhelmed, inadequate, fragile, vulnerable, unable to cope or go on, increased mood swings, decreased motivation, feeling burned out, crying more frequently and easily, isolation, changes in communication patterns and other relationship dynamics, withdrawal.

Cognitive Reactions:

Confusion, difficulty making decisions, difficulty problem solving, memory blanks, having ambiguous feelings, questioning why this happened in a world that is supposed to be safe, difficulty concentrating or paying attention.

Heroes are not immune to the above reactions and need to remind themselves that these are normal human responses to abnormal and traumatic circumstances. Although many of the underlying stresses cannot be prevented, you can increase your resistance by taking care of yourself and staying healthy. It is important to pace yourself and know your limits so you can continue to be available to your clients and your community.

The Challenge

When asked by CBC to describe in one word what his experience with the pandemic had been like, one medical professional immediately responded: "CHAOS".

He went on to say, "Things change every day ... every hour. Our supplies fluctuate from day to day, even the information we are being given changes constantly. Everything is unpredictable. And that causes me a lot of anxiety."



When everything is turned upside down, and your world becomes chaotic, regular routines and protocols no longer provide the usually secure and familiar structure. Questions like “Are we safe? Are we protected? Will there be resources for tomorrow, without even mentioning next week?”

Uncertainty is the root of anxiety. The biggest fear is the fear of not being able to control things, and when there is chaos, things are out of control. I am sure many of you have felt this and it is important to acknowledge and validate it.

The Need for Stabilization

While we know that change is inevitable, it is handled better if it is anticipated or when it occurs in the context of familiar routines. Predictability allows us to feel safe, and to develop a sense of control.

However, unexpected life changes such as a pandemic are never within our control. Thus, the unpredictable triggers fear of the unknown, eroding this sense of safety and mastery, leaving us feeling anxious and less able to cope with the vicissitudes of life.

In such situations, personally and organizationally, locally and nationally, there needs to be a sense of stabilization. Structure is a remedy for chaos. Good management and government can facilitate this with ongoing discussions, regular information updates, and supervision and support of providing and disposing of adequate protective equipment.

The Need for Understanding

Stabilization is the foundation on which we build understanding. It is hard to grasp reality when your mind is in chaos. Reassurance backed by action helps things to become more manageable. So as you face older people who are not comprehending why they have to stay in their rooms, try to recognize the reason behind the reaction. Their normal structured life is upside down.

They watch the news and are fearful of what may happen. So they express that fear in questions that, in their minds, would get things back to normal. Questions like, "Why family cannot come to visit, why they constantly have to wash their hands, or why their dinner cannot be served at the time they prefer", or any one of a thousand other questions you face every day.

To many people it seems like confinement. My 98 year old friend commented, "It feels like I am in prison." The best I can tell him is "Don, perhaps we can't give you what you want, but we are doing what you NEED."

Understanding is a remedy for fear. Sometimes we are guilty of telling people the "what", "how" and the "not needed", but we forget to tell them the why. In these fearful days, in the limited time you have with each person and the huge backlog of responsibilities you have, try to address those concerns as well as you can.

The Need for Emotional Release

No doubt you will see and experience a lot of emotion in these days. People are emotional because they cannot see loved ones, as well as the fact that their structure has been disrupted, and indeed that their life could be in jeopardy.

In these days especially, you, the caregiver, are this person's surrogate family. Even in better times, you were probably closer to many patients than their family was, but more so now in these days of isolation and quarantine.

I know you are a professional, but you are also a human being, and we get close to the people who depend upon us and whom we care for. When a patient dies, our grief is often unacknowledged as we are expected to support kin or blood relatives, many of whom did not seem to care during that person's latter days.

In addition, in some facilities it is not just one but many who are dying. You may experience fear and apprehension when someone you care for is diagnosed, whether that is someone in your care, or a colleague, because as this virus multiplies, you may be dealing with numerous losses; known as accumulating grief. It makes you feel all the more vulnerable to the possibility of losing others you care for. That makes a tough situation even more difficult.

Catharsis is a remedy for pressure. It is important to realize that you cared for them and they cared for you, thankful for all do.

You are a care “giver”. So it is OK that you miss them and grieve the relationship you shared with them. Express your grief. Grief is not a sign that we are weak, it is always a sign that we cared.

The Need for Reorganization

The remedy for loss of control is empowerment. Focus on what you can do rather than on the things you can't. Apply this principle to those in your care: “never do anything for someone who can do it for themselves”. You help people more by doing things with them than by doing it for them. If you do it for them they will sit back and expect you to do everything. But if you help them do it for themselves you will empower the person to know that they are not helpless. Oh, I know it is sometimes easier and faster to do it for them, but you are not doing them, or yourself any favours.

Responding to Stressful Events:

Here are some practical suggestions and strategies for self-care:

Look after your own self. Tiredness and exhaustion can adversely affect our stress levels, causing us to snap at a moment's notice. If you are not looking after yourself, it could impact the level of care you're giving to others. We have to look after ourselves first, so that we have more to give to others. We know it, but are we doing it?

Focus on your wellbeing. Get into healthy habits that will make you feel good from the inside. Drink plenty of water or juice and avoid excessive caffeine or alcohol. Eat sensibly. Maintaining a balanced nutritious diet is one of the best ways to maintain your health and energy. Getting rest and sleep helps avoid stress-induced symptoms. OK. I know, easier said than done.

Acknowledge the aspects of your job which are beyond your control and learn to accept them. If you get stressed out by not being able to plan, organise yourself as best you can.



Take control over things you can. Set your alarm clock 10 minutes earlier to enjoy a relaxing shower, or prepare a nice lunch to have at work. These little things will help you to feel as if you have a little more control.

Know and respect your limits. If you feel exhausted and need time off, try to do what your body is telling you. Sometimes we need to be reminded that the “body is smarter than the mind”. Respect the necessity for regularly scheduled time away in order to replenish your depleted “self”.

Take care of your own health, because neglecting your own wellbeing may result in you falling ill yourself. Visit your medical practitioner and take appropriate supplements or prescribed medications in order to maintain your own health.

Be aware of the signals of burnout which can include: withdrawing from friends, family and even patients; a loss of interest in activities you enjoyed in the past; feeling irritable, hopeless and helpless; getting sick more often; and increasing use of alcohol or medications.

Be on guard for any changes in your habits, attitudes and moods. Share your own concerns and struggles and your clients' reactions and issues with colleagues. Don't hesitate to ask others for advice and support.

Keep connected. It is easy to isolate yourself when your energies by necessity are focused on your work. Despite feeling tired or less than social, it is important to stay connected with the friends who support you. If you can't physically get out with friends, take time each day communicating through email, phone or social media to ease the possible sense of isolation you might feel. As much as possible, continue to participate in previous social or recreational activities.

One of the most difficult challenges for caregivers, especially in times of crisis, is to maintain some kind of balance between the demands of the vital emergency work you do and your own personal needs. Try to spend some quality time with family, even when quantity is impossible. Talk to them and listen to their stories, particularly when they express concern about your well-being.

Make time for yourself. When you spend all day worrying about other people, it can be difficult to reign in your emotions after a shift is over. Go for a 15-minute walk during lunch or after work, even if you are tired. Make time to do an activity which you really enjoy to calm you and adjust your mindset.

Get as much rest as you can. When we have more to do, sleep is often the area where we compromise. Remind yourself that being well rested is necessary for you to provide better care. Try to schedule regular rest times. If you have trouble sleeping, do something relaxing or enjoyable.

Include yourself on the list of people you are taking care of. Take some time every day to do something just for you. Taking care of yourself puts you in better shape to give better care to others. When you look after yourself by physical activity, reading a book or taking up a new hobby, your body releases dopamine – the “feel-good” hormone.

Don't forget to find humour in things. Get a daily dose of hilarity or absurdity by reading something funny or watching a comedy on TV. Laughter really is the best medicine.

Above all, remind yourself why you chose to get into care work and the reasons why you love it, as demanding as it is. When your mindset is optimistic, you'll be able to tackle stress more easily.

Delayed Stress Reactions

Past experience has shown that several weeks or even months after “full on” involvement, there can sometimes be an adverse reaction. Caregivers who coped magnificently at the time of the crisis and rose to every opportunity to support and serve, suddenly seem to “fall apart”. It is scary, but as always, there is a reason for the reaction.

It is because we were running on adrenalin during the crisis, and it is not until later when we stop and think, “Did I do that? How did we get through that?” that we can become aware and realize the full impact of what has happened, and the cost to ourselves.

This is a normal human reaction. It is also an opportunity; an invitation if you will, for us to take stock of what we have been through and how we have been transformed by the experience. We can learn about ourselves, about serving others, and about life, in order to prepare ourselves for the next eventuality.

Remember, you've got this:

Care work and caregiving is one of the most rewarding vocations, but also one of the most stressful. To provide care to the best of your abilities, you need to look after number one. I hope this guide will help to alleviate stressful symptoms you have experienced in order to allow you to continue making a real difference in your career.

But let me leave you by sharing the following story:

Early one day a man was walking along the seashore, enjoying the fresh sea air and the sunshine. He noticed that during the night many starfish had washed up on the beach.

After walking a mile or so, he saw a little girl, methodically picking up starfish and tossing them back into the water. He watched her for a few minutes, he then asked, "What are you doing?"

"I'm throwing starfish back into the ocean," the girl replied, "because if I leave them on the beach the sun will dry them and they will die, and I want them to live."

The man was touched by her consideration, but he motioned up and down the miles of beach he had just walked and said, "But there must be millions of starfish along here! How can you, one little girl, possibly expect to make a difference?"

The young girl thought for a moment. Then she reached down and carefully picked up another starfish, looked at it for a moment and threw it gently into the surf.

She turned to the man and smiled. "You may be right," she said, "but I made a difference for that one!"

You and I may not be able to change the world, or rescue all those who need to be liberated. But can you make a difference for that one?

Never ... ever ... underestimate the difference you can make when you care enough to reach out and help someone get back to where they need to be.

Thank you for your service to others, for your commitment and for your willingness through all the struggles, personal and professional, to make a difference.



About the author

Dr. Bill Webster has had extensive experience in helping people deal with the grief process. His knowledge of the subject is a unique blend of personal experience, academic education and practical application. After his wife died in 1983, Bill struggled to come to terms with his loss. He later made a study of the grieving process a part of his doctoral work at the University of Toronto. He has developed grief support programmes in many communities.

Dr. Bill Webster is the director of the Centre for the Grief Journey. He is also the author of:

A Not So Jolly Christmas
Grief Journey
Grief Matters 3 DVD Set
Help Me . . . If You Can
Lost for Words
Now What?
Understanding Bereavement
Understanding Grief DVD
When Life Changes
When Someone You Care about Dies
When Someone You Care about is Grieving
Why Me?

For more comforting assistance go to Dr. Bill's helpful programme at **griefjourney.com**

MEDITATIONS • VIDEOS • INFORMATION

Contact us today:

1-888-700-7766

Look for us on Facebook



2 Jane Street, Toronto, ON, M6S 4W8
arbormemorial.com