



## **SECTION FOUR - CARE FOR THE CAREGIVER**

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## CAREGIVER WELLBEING

Often, family members and friends intentionally or inadvertently become caregivers. The responsibility of a caregiver is self-directed and very challenging. Caregivers can develop symptoms such as compassion fatigue, secondary trauma, and/or vicarious trauma because they have been impacted by helping others without seeing their own wellness as a priority.

*“When you have two little kids and a fulltime job, self-care strategies are limited. I often give myself some space. I take a walk, or go for a drive with the music really loud. Sometimes I cry and allow myself some quiet time to collect my thoughts.”*

Spouse of a medically releasing CAF member

The following information will help guide caregivers, family members, active serving members and Veterans during a medical transition.

## CAREGIVER’S BILL OF RIGHTS

The following rights are reminders to take the time to take care of YOU. Read them when you need and add to them. Add rights that reflect your unique values, experiences and passions.

### I HAVE THE RIGHT TO:

1. Connect with myself and my own unique experience as a caregiver. I acknowledge and confront my thoughts and behaviours when I can, but at times, I give myself permission to avoid these and do something fun and distracting.
2. Take care of myself. This is not selfish. It will give me the energy to take better care of the person I care for.
3. Get help from others even if the person I care for disagrees. I know my limits, and do only what I can do.
4. Keep parts of my own life that do not include the person I care for. I have my own identity and my own life outside of caregiving.
5. Do some things just for myself, whenever I want.
6. Get angry, feel depressed, and talk about difficult feelings I experience.
7. Get consideration, affection, forgiveness, and acceptance for what I do for the person I care for and don't let the person I care for control me by using guilt, anger or depression.
8. Take pride in what I am doing. To be proud of the courage it has taken me to meet the needs of the person I care for.
9. Make a life for myself that will help me ensure that I will continue to have a sense of purpose and happiness when the individual I care for no longer needs my help.
10. Expect and demand improvements in resources to help and support caregivers.
11. Add my own statements of rights to this list, based on my own unique situation, feelings and experiences.

## **OPERATIONAL STRESS INJURIES AND THEIR IMPACTS**

What is an Operational Stress Injury?

An Operational Stress Injury (OSI) can be a mental or physical injury that occurred during the member's service with the Canadian Armed Forces. An OSI is best described as any persistent psychological difficulty resulting from operational duties. An OSI includes any diagnosed mental health conditions such as anxiety disorders, depression, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as well as other conditions.

### **CAREGIVER OF AN ILL AND INJURED MEMBER**

Caregivers may face significant challenges in supporting a Veteran or military member living with an OSI, alongside managing other responsibilities related to work, life, family and oneself.

There is support for caregivers who may be struggling and would like to speak with someone immediately. Services are available through the Family Information Line, Military Family Resource Centres, the Canadian Forces Member Assistance Program and VAC Assistance Service.

### **MILITARY FAMILY RESOURCE CENTRES**

Locate your closest MFRC at [www.CAFconnection.ca](http://www.CAFconnection.ca)

### **24/7 FAMILY INFORMATION LINE**

1-800-866-4546

[FIL@CAFconnection.ca](mailto:FIL@CAFconnection.ca)

### **24/7 CANADIAN FORCES MEMBER ASSISTANCE PROGRAM**

1-800-268-7708

### **24/7 VAC ASSISTANCE SERVICE**

1-800-268-7708

### **OPERATIONAL STRESS INJURY SOCIAL SUPPORT - FAMILY PEER SUPPORT**

1-800-883-6094

### **RECOGNIZING UNSAFE BEHAVIOURS**

Unsafe behaviours are destructive. Caregivers, members, and Veterans alike should seek help immediately if experiencing these unsafe behaviours:

- The urge to inflict harm to oneself or others and/or suicidal thoughts;
- The inability to control anger;
- The tendency to overspend;
- Becoming physically violent or threatening;

- Using substances to cope;
- Driving while under the influence;
- Being threatened (physically or emotionally) by someone; and/or
- Being forced to engage in sexual activity against one's will.

#### **TIPS FOR STAYING EMOTIONALLY/PSYCHOLOGICALLY HEALTHY:**

- Find a friend or family member to talk to or join a support group such as OSISS family peer support [www.osiss.ca](http://www.osiss.ca);
- Find community resources available at a local MFRC, Family Information Line 1-800-866-4546 or [www.CAFconnection.ca](http://www.CAFconnection.ca);
- Find a new interest that may have been put aside and try implementing it into the day's routine (reading a book, taking a bath, exercising, arts and craft, watching a favourite movie, etc.); and
- Seek professional help from a counsellor, therapist, religious or spiritual leader, or social worker if stress, sadness, or anxiety begins to feel out of control.

#### **FAMILY VIOLENCE PREVENTION**

Operational stress injuries do not result in family violence; however, family violence can happen in any home, at any time. The Canadian Armed Forces Family Violence Prevention and Awareness Campaign explains in detail what family violence is and where to go for support.

Family violence means an abuse of power within a relationship of family, trust or dependency, and includes many forms of abusive behaviour. Examples include emotional abuse, psychological abuse, criminal harassment, neglect, financial exploitation, destruction of property, injury to pets, physical assault, sexual assault and homicide. Abusive behaviour often results in the person feeling afraid and controlled.

A relationship is abusive if either partner or family member:

- Dominates or controls the other;
- Keeps the other isolated;
- Uses insults or put-downs;
- Damages the other's property;
- Shows extreme jealousy or possessiveness;
- Pushes, hits, throws things, chokes or physically restrains;
- Forces sex; and/or
- Limits access to money.

Where to go for support in the Canadian Armed Forces (connect through local MFRC):

- Base/Wing/Unit Family Crisis Team;
- Military Police;
- Chaplains;
- Social Work Officers;
- Medical Officers;
- CFMAP 1-800-268-7708; and
- Family Information Line (24/7) 1-800-866-4546.

Where to go for support outside the Canadian Armed Forces:

- Emergency Services 911 police;
- Military Family Resource Centres;
- Shelters;
- Victim Services;
- Rape Crisis or Sexual Assault Support Centres;
- Social or Family Service Agency;
- Children's Aid Society; and
- Hospitals.

For more information, visit the Canadian Armed Forces Family Violence Policy Standards at:

[www.forces.gc.ca/en/about-policies-standards-defence-admin-orders-directives-5000/5044-4.page](http://www.forces.gc.ca/en/about-policies-standards-defence-admin-orders-directives-5000/5044-4.page)

## **STRESS AND CAREGIVERS**

Taking care of a person living with mental illness or experiencing mental health challenges can be both rewarding and stressful. You will learn new skills and build a stronger relationship with the person you care for, though this time may be demanding as you take on new responsibilities. Stress is a natural part of life, but if not managed well, it can lead to your own health problems. Caregivers can have a tendency to focus on the person they care for more than themselves and put her/himself as a second priority. The most important thing to remember as a caregiver is to take care of YOU. Actions we take to take care of our health and wellbeing are known as self-care.

Although being a caregiver entails advocacy for the individual, and lots of it, it is important for you to advocate for yourself and set boundaries. Just as in the pre-flight instructions, you should put on your own oxygen mask before helping another person put on theirs. Caregivers in the mental health context need to take care of themselves before they can take care of someone else.



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## COMMON BARRIERS TO SELF-CARE INCLUDE:

Your own attitudes and beliefs:

*"I'm being selfish if I sleep in late today."*

Being afraid of what you need:

*"I'm feeling over-worked, I need time off but can't take leave."*

Being afraid or not knowing where or how to ask for help:

*"I don't want to bother them, they have their own problems."*

Wanting to care and show your affections in a selfless way (common with family caregivers):

*"He's my son, he's my priority."*

## TIPS FOR TAKING CARE OF YOU

- Set limits for yourself on what you can get done
- Say no if you need to: it is okay
- Ask for help: family, friends, even colleagues may want to help but may not know how to
- Delegate some of your responsibilities to others
- Take time to take care of yourself daily
- Prioritize your day
- Engage in activities you find relaxing (meditation, yoga, or a daily walk)
- Know your limits
- Learn how to recognize when you feel stressed
- Learn ways to cope with stress
- Talk to others who have been through what you are going through
- Share your feelings and thoughts with those close to you
- Maintain your other relationships
- Try not to rely on caffeine, alcohol and drugs to cope
- Focus on things you can control
- Set realistic goals for yourself and the person you care for
- Be prepared so that if you need more support you will know who to turn to

## BUILD YOUR OWN TOOLBOX

**SKILL:** Connecting

**TOOL:** Creating my support network

- When thinking of a support network, what comes to mind?
- Who and what do you need?
- Who could help you with each need?
- Keep in mind the various supports around you including:
  - informal supports (friends, neighbours, family)
  - formal supports (doctor, social worker, counselor)
  - unique supports (support group, faith or spiritual group)

Looking at the table below, create a similar one for YOUR support network.

WHAT I NEED?	WHO?	HOW?
To vent to someone	My best friend	Over coffee or phone
Help with walking the dog	My neighbour's daughter	I will pay her \$7 a week
Respite	My mother-in-law	She will come over one Saturday per month
Cleaning	My other children	I will make a chore chart

## WHAT TYPE OF HELP DO YOU NEED?

Figuring out what type of help you need is very important. Explain your situation to family, friends, colleagues, and community members so that they are able to understand your situation and support you. Give them regular updates and try to include them in any decisions you want to make.

You may need help to take some time for yourself – maybe even a short vacation. Ask a family member or friend to take your place and be there if the person you care for needs support during your time away. Think about what you can and cannot do on a regular basis. Then think about how often you need help. Is it every day, once a week or in the evenings? Make a list of people who have agreed to help out when you need a break.

Ref: Ottawa Public Health; Canadian Mental Health Association; Canadian Public Health Association; Mental Illness Caregivers Association; Military Family Services. Mental Health Caregiver Guide: A guide for caregivers of persons living with mental illness or experiencing mental health challenges. Ottawa, ON: Ottawa Public Health; 2016.



## FEELINGS ABOUT CAREGIVING

Everyone's caring experience is unique to their situation, as are the feelings that go with it. As a caregiver, you may find yourself in sensitive situations that cause both positive and negative feelings – this is completely natural. It is important to remember that your emotions are sometimes out of your control, and “how you feel is how you feel”. It is normal to have lots of different feelings and they are not right or wrong – they are your own. Let yourself feel your emotions and try to not judge them but rather accept them. Acceptance will let you confront these feelings and what they mean to you, how they affect your actions or even affect the individual you care for.

Long-term caregiver Maureen shares her thoughts:

*“I think what would have helped me early on is knowing that it's okay to get angry about all the responsibilities. It is not necessarily okay to display your anger in certain ways. And it is okay to say no.”*

Below are some of the common experiences that caregivers feel.

## NEGATIVE FEELINGS ABOUT CAREGIVING

Caregivers face difficult situations and can sometimes have negative feelings about these situations. You may try to ignore these feelings by not letting yourself feel them or work through them. You may tell yourself that you should not feel a certain way or you may ignore your feelings.

But your feelings are your own; they are part of your unique experience and journey.

The negative feelings you may experience depend on your own situation. These are completely natural.

**ANXIETY:** Being unsure about the future can make you feel anxious. It can happen when you worry that something bad will happen. For example, you may feel anxious because you do not have enough help to cope with your current situation, which can lead you to think that things will not get better and might actually get worse.

**FEAR:** You experience fear when you feel threatened. The responsibilities of caregiving or what that includes may scare you.

**GUILT:** Some situations can cause you to feel guilt. For example, you could feel guilty because:

- you think that you are not doing enough
- you think that you do not have the energy to deal with one more day
- you are not able to keep promises you made to the individual you care for
- you have your own life outside the home while the person you are caring for might not.



**FRUSTRATION, ANGER, AND RESENTMENT:** These feelings often go together. You may be frustrated because you cannot find enough time for yourself and this may lead to anger and resentment.

**HURT:** There may be days when you feel that no one appreciates what you are doing. For example, the individual may experience anger or frustration and may at times direct this towards you. It may be hard for you not to feel hurt or alone at these times.

**ISOLATION:** Sometimes you may not have the time to do things you like as often as you used to because of your caregiving responsibilities; this may lead to feeling all alone.

**GRIEF AND SADNESS:** Grieving is the process of adjusting to a loss. Grief can make you feel many emotions that are tough to understand. You could feel sad, angry, lonely, anxious and frustrated at the same time but also feel each of them separately at various times during the caregiving process.

## **POSITIVE FEELINGS ABOUT CAREGIVING**

Caring for a person can be a wonderful and positive experience. It can be full of laughter and close moments. You may get a lot of satisfaction from being able to help the person you care for when they need you most.

The positive feelings you have about being a caregiver depend on your own situation.

### **PERSONAL GROWTH**

You may feel that you are growing personally because you are learning skills, such as being more patient, that allow you to give the best care. At times, you may feel unsure how you or the person you care for will overcome a challenge – but you take things day by day or hour by hour and learn from it.

### **GREATER APPRECIATION FOR HEALTH AND WELLBEING**

Caring for someone who is very ill can change the way you look at life and death. This may lead to a new understanding or deeper sense of the meaning of life; it may change what you see as important or change your personal goals.

### **STRENGTHENED RELATIONSHIPS**

Often the caregiving role helps you become much closer, physically and emotionally, to the person you are caring for and this can make you feel more appreciated. You learn that through hope and courage come strength. This helps form a trusting attachment to the person you care for.

*“I don’t need to fill the silence, all I need to do is be there.”*

- Mariam, caregiver

Sometimes caregivers are not well themselves, yet they have to care for family members, like children and youth. As a caregiver it is important to remain strong and maintain your own wellbeing so that you can fulfill your role as a caregiver.

## STAYING STRONG: WHEN CARING FOR CHILDREN

As a caregiver, Staying Strong may not always feel possible. But by following as many of the Staying Strong points below, you are giving yourself and the child you are caring for their greatest chance to be healthy and resilient. Check off as many of the six steps below that you can do today. Don't be frustrated about the ones you cannot do right now. Try each day to get closer to achieving that step.

### HOW CAREGIVERS CAN STAY STRONG

#### SLEEP

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- Follow a routine
- Make sleep hygiene important
- Have a good balance between rest and activities
- Role model good behaviour for the child you care for

#### TAKE CARE OF YOUR HEALTH

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- In order to care for someone else you have to stay healthy
- Know your limits
- Practice self-care
- Do not push yourself to burnout
- Have a back-up caregiver or respite in case you become sick and need time off

#### RELATIONSHIPS

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- Think of your relationship with the child you care for: what is working well? What could be improved?
- How are you maintaining validation and attachment in your relationship?
- Does anxiety or fear get in the way of you being the caregiver you want to be?

#### OWN IT

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- Once a day do something that makes you feel in control of your life
- Something that's just for you
- That you're good at, that's positive – this will give you a sense of mastery and accomplishment.

#### NUTRITION

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- Eat a balanced diet, not too much, not too little, food gives you energy: don't run on empty
- Model good behaviour for the child you care for and educate them about healthy eating and food choices
- Try to make eating together a regular activity, buying groceries and meal preparation are also activities you can do together

#### GET MOVING

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- Ensure that you maintain leisure and activity
- Incorporate physical activity such as an evening or morning walk into your everyday life
- Get involved with social activities and organized sports



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## HOW CHILDREN CAN STAY STRONG

### SLEEP

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- Have child keep a bedtime routine
- Limit technology-use before bed
- Make sleep hygiene important
- Help them maintain a good balance between rest and activities

### TAKING MEDICATIONS

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- CHILDREN CANNOT TAKE MEDICATIONS ON THEIR OWN
- Give medication as prescribed
- Monitor how well medication is working and any side effects – report these to health care provider

### RELATIONSHIPS

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- Help the child maintain positive and supportive relationships
- Gain support from child care providers or school officials so that the child is constantly surrounded by a trusting adult they can confide in
- Teach the child how to communicate what they are feeling
- Maintain the warmth in your relationship with the child
- Make times for snuggles and cuddling

### OWN IT

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- Once a day have the child do something that they feel confident doing
- This provides a sense of mastery and will make them feel positive and increase their self-esteem
- Put a sticker on a calendar for each day they do this

### NUTRITION

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- Have the child eat a balanced diet made of healthy and nutrient-dense foods;
- Not too much, not too little: food is fuel
- Don't have the child run on empty

### GET MOVING

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- Engage the child in activities outside in nature
- Encourage walking, exercise, extra-curricular activities, and sports

## STAYING STRONG WHEN CARING FOR YOUTH

As a caregiver, Staying Strong may not always feel possible. By following as many of the Staying Strong points below as you can, you are giving yourself and the youth you care for the greatest chance to be healthy and resilient. Check off as many of the six steps below that you can do today. Don't be frustrated about the ones you cannot do right now. Try each day to get closer to achieving that step.

### HOW CAREGIVERS CAN STAY STRONG

#### SLEEP

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- Keep a routine
- Make sleep hygiene important
- Limit technology-use
- Have a good balance between rest and activities
- Model good behaviour for the youth you care for

#### TAKE CARE OF YOUR HEALTH

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- In order to care for someone else you have to stay healthy
- Know your limits
- Practice self-care
- Do not push yourself until you are so ill that you can no longer care for someone else
- Have a back-up caregiver in mind in case you become sick and need time off

#### RELATIONSHIPS

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- Think of your relationship with the youth you care for
- What is working well?
- What could be improved?
- How are you maintaining validation and attachment in your relationship?
- Does anxiety or fear get in the way of you being the caregiver you want to be?

#### OWN IT

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- Once a day do something that makes you feel in control of your life
- Something that's for you
- That you're good at, that's positive
- This will give you a sense of mastery and accomplishment

#### NUTRITION

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- Eat a balanced diet;
- Not too much, not too little;
- Model good behaviour for the youth you care for and educate them about healthy eating and food choices
- Try to make eating together a regular activity and make groceries and meal preparation an activity you do together
- Food is fuel – don't run on empty.

#### GET MOVING

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- Make sure that you maintain leisure and activity
- Incorporate physical activity into everyday life
- Try something like morning or evening walks, get involved with social activities and organized sports.

## HOW YOUTH CAN STAY STRONG

### SLEEP

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- Encourage sleep hygiene, educate the youth about the importance of maintaining a good balance between rest and activity
- Rest is important to recovery
- Help the youth adopt a bedtime routine

### TAKING MEDICATIONS

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- Ensure that the youth is taking medication as prescribed
- Have them tell their doctor how it's working for them
- Make sure they know their rights
- Monitor and report side effects, and are aware of the harmful interactions between drugs and alcohol and their medications
- Have them talk to their doctor or someone they trust

### RESIST

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- Help the youth resist urges
- Avoid negative behaviours
- Negative behaviours can include people, social media, technology, drugs, and alcohol

### OWN IT

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- Once a day encourage the youth to do something that makes them feel in control of their life
- Something that's for them, that they're good at, that's positive – this will give them a sense of mastery and accomplishment

### NUTRITION

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- Encourage the youth to eat a balanced diet
- Not too much, not too little
- Food is fuel - don't run on empty

### GET MOVING

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- Ensure that the youth maintains leisure and activity
- Encourage them to incorporate physical activity into their everyday life by getting outdoors and walk
- Encourage them to get involved with social activities and organized sports

## EMOTIONAL LIMITATIONS

The stress of your added responsibilities as a caregiver and the feelings that go along with it can be very difficult. It is possible to become so overwhelmed that you cannot give the best care. This does not mean that you are a bad caregiver. It just means that you have reached your limit. At this point it is important to ask for help.

### HERE ARE SOME REASONS WHY CAREGIVERS DO NOT ASK FOR HELP:

- Feelings of guilt and shame
- Not knowing that others are in the same situation
- Lack of knowledge about available options/resources
- Not being able to pay for formal caregiving services
- Not enough time to find help
- Cultural beliefs that discourage help from outside the family
- Lack of services to meet your needs
- Feelings of depression, which can reduce the motivation needed to find help
- Not being able to talk about feelings

It is always okay to ask for help. Asking for help is part of providing the best care possible. Many caregivers share this advice:

*“Do not be afraid to ask for the help you need!”*

You should feel proud of what you are able to do and realize that you have a right to continue to maintain good physical and mental health, and to take time to do things other than caregiving that make life meaningful for you. If you notice a big change in your mental or physical health, speak to your health care provider about it as soon as you can. Several distress lines offer support to caregivers, do not hesitate to reach out.

*“I feel guilty taking time for myself, what helped was remembering that I’m a person too with needs and with limits.”*

Pierre, caregiver



