

Support for Caregivers

Taking Breaks:

Sometimes caregivers are so wrapped up in caring for their loved one they discount their own needs entirely. If you have the responsibility of caring for a loved one who requires your increasing attention, then it is important to recognize that you will need a break. Perhaps you sometimes become short-tempered when you find yourself answering the same questions that you have answered a dozen times already. Maybe you have developed insomnia; or perhaps you've broken down crying when even the simplest things go wrong. This means your nerves have become stressed, and it's past time you need some respite. Before this happens, you should begin the process of getting the help you need. It will be easier for you if you take it one step at a time.

First: Tell your doctor what's happening to your loved one—and to you. Stress can result in health risks for you, so your doctor will want to monitor your health and wellbeing. Remember, too, that if your health breaks down, your ability to care for your loved one will be significantly impaired.

Second: If your doctor is also treating your loved one, ask him or her to administer the short form of the Mini-Mental Assessment. If initial test results indicate, your loved one will be referred to a geriatric psychiatrist for further assessment which will probably include a CT scan. The results will indicate the type of dementia. Most people have heard of Alzheimer's (which is the leading cause of dementia); however, other important types include Lewy body and vascular dementias as well as fronto temporal disorder.

Third: Join the Caregivers Support Group which is held at the Seniors Services Society (250-537-4604) at 11 a.m. every Wednesday. Led by Marg Monro (250-537-5004), the Caregivers Support Group consists of caregivers whose loved ones are experiencing various dementias and other chronic conditions.

Fourth: Prepare to take advantage of various programs to help you care for your loved one: such as the Day Care program, Community Bathing Program, and Respite Program. A long-term case manager (Island Health General Enquiries Health Info line #1-888-533-2273) will assess your loved one to determine need.

Fifth: Start taking advantage of these programs so that you can free up time and energy for the rest of your life.

Specific Things that you need to do to prepare for these programs:

Adult Day Care:

The day program is intended as much for the caregiver to take a mini respite from caregiving as it is for the client attending the program to preserve and enhance remaining capabilities. Consider the possibility of using the day program to bridge to longer respite stays (that can be booked in blocks of 2 weeks if deemed necessary by the Home & Community Care case manager). The day program includes various activities, a lunch and the opportunity to make or rediscover social connections.

It helps if you can provide a list of interests or hobbies that your loved one enjoys – perhaps these can be used in the day program to improve the appeal. In some cases, loved ones attend the program with the client for a few hours and then cut back the time spent as the client acclimatizes to the program over a few days of attendance. Ideally, this program offers the caregiver a break so it is important to reduce this as quickly as possible to maximize your respite time. Keep in mind that negative feedback is to be expected and most clients adjust to, and enjoy, the program in time.

Do not be discouraged if your loved one is negative about the program initially or for some time after attendance begins – changes and transitions are particularly hard for people living with physical and cognitive challenges. Allow the person to be a bit negative and consider ways and means to encourage attendance and to maintain attendance over time – day programs work wonderfully for those that attend and those that get a break from caregiving. Finally, whenever possible, ask for help with transporting to and from the day program; in some cases the Greenwoods program can provide a ride in the bus – another option might be a friend or family member to provide a ride (occasional help is better than none and maximizes your energy over time).

Community Bathing Program:

The bathing program offers an assisted bath in a jetted tub with a side entry door to improve hygiene and maintain skin health. If your loved one is having difficulty with maintaining hygiene due to physical challenge or a negative response to bathing (either with your or a home support worker's assistance) a referral to the bathing program might be in order. Speak to your case manager and share your concerns about bathing challenges and the case manager will assess for assisted bathing service.

Make point form notes about what works and what doesn't work for bathing in your home and share those notes with the bathing worker – small tips are always helpful to make the process smoother for clients. The bathing program worker is usually female and we do not have the ability to cater to gender preferences – but it is very helpful for our staff to know if the client might take some time and encouragement to adjust to an assisted bath for any reason.

Respite:

You can book your loved one into a room at Greenwoods, so that you can take break. Here are some tips about how it works and what you need to do to prepare:

- Prior to your loved one's scheduled booking, you will meet with a Greenwoods nurse to prepare to bring your loved one in. You will be asked a variety of questions about your loved one's special needs, so it would be helpful to make a list in advance.
- Contact your doctor to order your loved one's medications to be provided in blister packs.
- Be prepared to complete a health directive. You will need to make decisions about whether you wish, in the event of an adverse health event, to have your loved one resuscitated. This decision can be stressful, so it is wise to start thinking about it now and to discuss it with your loved one and with your family.
- Select (how much; type) clothing for your loved one and label it with his or her initials to aid in identification. A black permanent ink marker is sufficient.
- Select some photographs, books, and other familiar items to help your loved one feel at home. A calendar (or pre-written letters describing your itinerary) may be helpful.
- If your loved one is cognitively able to use a cell phone, bringing one along is something to consider.
- Arrange for family members, friends, or a paid companion to call on your loved one while you are away. Consider asking them to keep a log on major events of which they are aware about what happened while you were gone. This will aid you when you return to talk to your loved one about what they did while at Greenwoods.
- Consider well in advance what you will say to your loved one about what to expect. You may want to arrange a tour of the facility and to sit in on whatever activity is in progress. To the extent that your loved one is cognitively able, you may wish to discuss what to expect and address such issues as where you are going and what you will be doing. Some respite residents participate fully in the wide variety of available activities, enjoy the new surroundings, and think of themselves as being in a resort or on a cruise; others withdraw into themselves and need to be encouraged to participate. It will be helpful to your loved one if he or she has a positive attitude toward the experience. Even though you may feel guilty about "abandoning" your loved one, his or her experience during respite will likely be enhanced if you avoid expressing such feelings and instead take a positive attitude yourself. Plan to take your break guilt free. You deserve it!

Here are some tips for checking in on the day:

- Consider bringing a friend, relative, or paid companion with you to aid your leave taking. That individual can accompany your loved one to whatever activity is in progress while you deal with hanging up clothing and putting photographs etc. on the dresser.
- Before you leave, bring your loved one and friend to the room as you have furnished it to familiarize them with its contents.
- When it's time for lunch, it's time for you to leave. Your loved one's friend, relative, or companion will aid the transition by remaining behind to reassure him or her that you will return in due course and that he or she will visit your loved one at regular intervals.

- When it is time for that person to leave, it is best to make sure first that your loved one is involved in an activity and to say simply, “I have to go to the . . . (post office, drug store, to work, or whatever); I will see you (tomorrow, or whenever).”