

## Editorial: Caregiving Challenges and Opportunities in Canada

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## Editorial: Caregiving Challenges and Opportunities in Canada

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“There are only four kinds of people in the world — those that have been caregivers, those that are caregivers, those who will be caregivers, and those who will need caregivers.” – The late Former First Lady, Rosalynn Carter.

This quote by the late Rosalynn Carter encapsulates the universal significance of caregiving in our lives. While it underscores the interconnectedness of humanity, the quote also serves as a powerful call to action to foster a culture of care, understanding, and solidarity in our societies.

In Canada, family and friend caregivers form an essential pillar of the social and health care systems, providing invaluable support to individuals with chronic illnesses, disabilities, or aging-related needs. However, amidst the act of caregiving lie complex challenges that demand attention and concerted efforts for effective resolution. Articles curated in this special issue of the *Journal of Recovery in Mental Health* explore the prevalent challenges faced by family and friend caregivers, as well as the existing evidence-based solutions and resources that are attempting to respond to these challenges.

Financial constraints are a pervasive challenge among family caregivers. In Canada, caregivers often incur out-of-pocket expenses for medications, medical supplies, and transportation, exacerbating their financial strain<sup>1</sup>. Moreover, the opportunity costs associated with caregiving, such as reduced employment hours or career interruptions further contribute to financial distress. In 2015, the federal compassionate care benefit was extended to 6 months, providing Employment Insurance to caregivers caring for the critically ill or dying family members<sup>2</sup>. However, this benefit is restricted to those caring for individuals who are imminently dying, while most caregivers may provide care to the chronically ill or older adults with long-term and complex care needs<sup>3</sup>. Another common challenge faced by family caregivers is the absence of adequate respite care and suitable housing options. Limited access to respite services<sup>4</sup> and the shortage of affordable and accessible housing, deprive them of much-needed relief and support, which may exacerbate caregiver stress. In an op-ed by Bates et al., the authors, representing

the constituents of the Ontario Caregiver Coalition, spoke to the importance of getting caregivers' input to inform actions intended to bring about policy changes. The volunteer-run Coalition is currently analyzing survey data from 400+ Ontarians to develop policy briefs.

Speaking to caregivers about their brain and mental health is crucial for maintaining their well-being. In the article, "Aging well together: Promoting brain health for aging individuals with IDD and their families," Phillips et al. articulated the concerns and lived experience of family members of individuals living with Intellectual & Developmental Disabilities (IDD) and the importance of learning new practical skills, techniques, and strategies to promote brain health, healthy lifestyle, and stress management. By Integrating these practices in their daily lives, caregivers may lower their risks of cognitive decline<sup>5</sup>.

Family caregivers often navigate a complex emotional landscape. Guilt may stem from perceived inadequacies in caregiving or feelings of obligation and may be associated with caregiver stress and depressive symptoms<sup>6</sup>. In contrast, hope serves as a coping mechanism, offering caregivers resilience and optimism in the face of challenges<sup>7</sup>. Research suggests that higher levels of hope correlate with lower levels of depression and anxiety<sup>8</sup>. In her op-ed, L. Karikari (Social Worker; Ontario Shores Geriatric Transitional Unit) talked about integrating caregiver's mental health "into the broader discourse surrounding recovery outcomes." I could not agree more. The caregiving journey, when viewed through the lens of the CHIME framework – Connectedness, Hope & Optimism, Identity, Meaning, Empowerment, allows the caregivers to gain insight into their experiences and identify areas for growth and resilience. Caregiving, in many cases, is a marathon. By running along-side each other, we form a community that supports each other's personal recovery and well-being.

Caregiving is a shared human experience, and it transcends cultural, social, and economic boundaries. The multifaceted challenges of family and friend caregiving presented an opportunity for different sectors to collaborate and to leverage each others' strength to build a supportive society conducive to the well-being of both the caregivers and the care recipients. Only by doing so, may we pave the way for a more sustainable and equitable caregiving landscape.

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