

Mindful Moments for Family Caregivers

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Mindful Moments for Family Caregivers

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Being a caregiver does not come with a prescribed path forward or a clear role description. Each caregiving experience is specific to the individual and the person they are caring for. Caregivers often find themselves in a constant state of uncertainty, change, and lack of control. Strong and sometimes new emotions and feelings can appear as the caregiver role begins and evolves over time. The demands of caregiving can also impact one's mental and physical health, as well as relationships. Given all of these factors, navigating the caregiving experience is by no means trivial. Caregivers are often expected to find their own way through this complex experience, all the while caring for another individual and trying to maintain their own sense of well-being.

With over 7 million caregivers in Canada,¹ more support programs and resources are being offered to caregivers that focus on well-being. One invaluable resource that caregivers can benefit from, and that is scientifically proven to positively impact mental, physical, emotional, and relational health is mindfulness.

In simple terms, mindfulness is the ability to focus on the present moment by being aware of internal and external experiences, and with an attitude of open curiosity and without judgement. Through mind and body awareness, one can be more in tune with thoughts, feelings, and emotions when they arise. Think of mindfulness as a form of brain training, just like physical exercise is to body training. With this type of training, the functioning and structure of the brain adapts and evolves for the positive.² Mindfulness develops emotional regulation, decreases the stress response in the body, improves focus and attention, and increases one's sense of self and connection to others, among several other benefits.

The accessibility and simplicity of mindfulness provides individuals with readily available techniques that can be incorporated into every aspect of the daily life of a caregiver. Like any newfound skill, the more mindfulness is practised and integrated, the more habitual it becomes.

I first experienced my own mindful moments in caregiving in 2018, when my elderly father once again became ill. My studies in mindfulness became instrumental in my ability to be less reactionary, to be more mentally and emotionally available to my family, and to be aware when waves of grief, sadness, anger, confusion, and impatience hit me.

Prior to this, I was an absent-minded caregiver, doing what I needed to do but not truly living the experience alongside those I cared for. I avoided my feelings which later felt like a tangled mess to unravel. Work demands and lack of healthy boundaries only added to my mental, emotional, and physical exhaustion. My mind was ruminating, spinning in negative thoughts. This created the perfect storm for me to experience burnout. After several months of recovery and time off of work, I realized change was needed and started practising mindfulness.

The insights and skills that I developed post-burnout now guide me, both as a caregiver to elderly parents and a mindfulness facilitator assisting other caregivers. There are a few foundational concepts of mindfulness that can be very helpful to individuals living with the day-to-day realities of caregiving:

1. Present Moment Awareness

This is the core concept of mindfulness—noticing what is happening and being fully present. As caregivers, we are often going from one task to the other, whether it be booking doctors' appointments, tending to a loved one's needs, advocating for care, and balancing life/works demands. In this constant mode of 'doing,' we can lose ourselves in caregiving duties, rather than truly *being with* the person we are caring for or even being self-aware of our own emotions, thoughts, and feelings. Next time you are caught in this mode of 'doing' with running thoughts, take time to stop, notice, and pay attention. Notice what is around you, sit with the person you are caring for, take some slow, deep breaths, observe anything about your current experience. In this process of noticing, we find ourselves slowing down, the mind becomes less cluttered and clearer, the body goes from being in a constant state of stress to relaxing. Try it and see; be curious. Like any habit you are learning, it does get easier to be present the more you practise doing it.

2. Accept That Change is Constant

As caregivers we get thrown curve balls on a daily basis, such as not knowing how the person we are caring for is feeling from hour to hour, dealing with changing care needs and care provider schedules, noticing illness evolve, and handling our own thoughts and emotions. If change is inevitable, do you want to resist it or be open to it? Yes, change can be uncomfortable, and it is in these instances of the unknown that the 'fight, flight, freeze' reactivity kicks in. Any resistance to change requires energy and only creates more tension, anxiety, and friction for ourselves. On the other hand, with awareness and a calm mind, we can be more open to change when it arises and lean into it in a kind way for ourselves by reflecting on why we are resisting the change and then choosing how to respond to it.

3. Develop Self-Compassion and Nurture Positive Emotions

As caregivers, we need to take care of ourselves. If you reach burnout, you will be of no use to the person you are caring for. Yes, caregiving is hard, and we can find ourselves in a negative spin at times or try to avoid what is staring us in the face. Even the relationship we have with the person we are caring for or with family members or healthcare providers is not always easy. Yes, let's recognize that navigating relationships takes work. When difficult caregiving situations or emotions come up, be aware of them. Rather than ignoring them or burying them, take a pause when available, and recognize and acknowledge these challenges and emotions with kindness towards yourself. Find moments to balance difficult emotions with positive emotions such as joy, gratitude, compassion, kindness, and gratitude. Allow yourself to laugh, to be thankful for something, to express gratitude, or to take joy in something that brings you pleasure. Positive emotions not only feel good, but they also promote positive changes in the brain's neuropathways and counter the stress response in the body.

4. Connection with Others

Caregiving can be a lonely and isolating experience. Finding time to connect with others takes time and energy, both considered a luxury when caregiving. Sometimes we do not even know what we need, when we need help, or how to articulate it. Try and maintain connection with others, be it family, friends, neighbours, community groups, a professional support worker, or even strangers. As humans, we are social beings, and sharing our stories can impact our sense of self in a role that is often invisible to others.

There are also many caregiver peer support programs and resources that exist, including mindfulness programs. Sharing and talking to other caregivers gives voice to the ups and downs of the caregiving journey and provides opportunities to learn from others who are facing similar challenges. Your experience and insights can also be helpful to other caregivers. There is so much to process in the caregiver role; know that you are not alone.

Visit the Ontario Caregiver Organization website at ontariocaregiver.ca or call them to learn about programs and what is available in your community.

Finding Your Mindful Moments

Finding time to develop your mindfulness skills can be challenging given the competing priorities of caregiving and our busy lives. Part of the process is to find which form of mindfulness works for you and this may change from time to time. Start with simple and accessible mindfulness techniques that can be integrated in day-to-day life, as many times a day as you like. Begin with pausing and being present and aware when you are doing a daily task. When you notice the mind wandering, bring your attention back to what you are doing. If you have a few minutes to yourself, let your attention focus on one of your senses or your breath. As you become more at ease with these moments of

mindfulness, you can do them for longer durations of time. You can also start to be more aware of physical sensations in the body, emotions, and thoughts.

Mindful movement is another approach of developing body awareness and includes practices like slow walking, yoga, tai chi, and qigong. Even alternative approaches of self-expression and reflection such as narrative writing, journaling, and expressive arts provide opportunities to develop mindfulness skills.

Below are two mindfulness practices that will develop some of the concepts shared in this editorial.

Mindful Moment of Awareness Practice

This practice can be done in four minutes. You can also lengthen it by letting your attention focus on the breath for a long period of time:

- Find a comfortable seated position with your feet connected to the ground. You can gently close eyes or softly gaze downwards, whichever feels more natural for you.
- Bring awareness to your body seated and supported. Feel the connection of your feet with the ground beneath you.
- Take a deep breath inward, slowly breathing in through the nose, and then slowly breathing out through the mouth. Take three more of these slow, deep breaths. With each breath you take, you are signaling to the brain and the body to slow down. Notice any change in the body with each mindful breath you take, feel the body release with each out breath.
- Slowly transition to a natural pace of breathing, one that feels good for you right now. Stay in this state of breath awareness for as long as you like.
- If the mind wanders, this is completely normal. Notice it and come back to focusing on the breath.
- Take a moment to do a friendly check-in with yourself. Notice your frame of mind, how your body feels, any physical sensations, your mood, or any emotions that may be present. There is no right or wrong answer. This is a moment of simply being aware and observing with kindness, just like you are to a friend or someone you care about.
- As you take in your next breath and if you are comfortable doing so, breathe in something good for yourself, whatever you need right now. It could be providing qualities of warmth, comfort, and friendliness, wishing yourself well, gratitude for this time you are taking for self-care, acknowledging the day so far, or something else.
- Bring your attention back to your breath. Feel your body seated in your chair.
- When you are ready, gently open your eyes.

Mindful Moment of Gratitude Practice

This practice takes about five minutes and can be done at the end of each day.

- Write down three things that you are grateful for today.
- Read the three things you are grateful for.
- Notice how you feel after reading them.

As you experience your own mindful moments, remember to be curious and kind to yourself in the process. Being mindful is not meant to cause additional stress or anxiety. On the contrary, as you become more familiar with mindfulness, you will come to experience the benefits that science has discovered. Mindfulness will enrich your caregiving experience and support you along the way.

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