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Loretta Karikari

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Caregiver Mental Health: A Crucial Piece of the Recovery Puzzle

Loretta KariKari¹

¹Ontario Shores Centre for Mental Health Sciences, Whitby ON Canada



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For ages, families have been the cornerstone of care during times of illness. Today, our healthcare system leans more on informal caregivers to aid those with chronic ailments, mental health issues, and seniors¹. As a social worker in geriatric psychiatry, I deeply understand the crucial support caregivers offer older adults and the health care team. Despite their noble efforts, the demands of caregiving can impact their mental well-being significantly².

Caregivers are often family members, spouses, adult children, neighbours or close friends. They serve as pillars of strength and stability in the lives of individuals especially older adults with mental illness and/or neurodegenerative diseases such as dementia. Their tireless efforts, compassion, and sacrifices are fundamental in fostering an environment conducive to recovery. However, amidst their selfless dedication, caregivers are saying they are starting to feel their mental health deteriorate^{2,3}. Many have shared their lived experiences with me, and the most common theme is that they find themselves suffering emotionally, mentally, and physically.

Caregivers are reporting heightened stress levels, sleep disturbances, anxious mood and thoughts, and inadequate coping mechanisms⁴. The demands of caregiving present symptoms of chronic stress, anxiety, depression, and burnout^{2,3}. The emotional strain of witnessing a loved one's struggles, coupled with the practical responsibilities of providing care, can leave caregivers feeling overwhelmed and isolated⁵.

Many caregivers whom I have encountered have shared that transitioning into the role of a caregiver isn't just about taking on new responsibilities; it's a complete overhaul of one's life dynamics. Let me share with you a story about a caregiver whose journey began when her mother was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. Determined to provide the best possible care, they became her primary caregiver, along with caring for her three children. This caregiver's accounts of days blurred into nights as she navigated the challenges of caregiving, from managing medications to coping with her

mother's cognitive decline, while trying to get her children to school, hockey practice, and swimming. Despite her unwavering commitment, this caregiver soon found herself teetering on the brink of exhaustion and despair, stressed, and her mood fluctuating. This caregiving narrative epitomizes the struggles faced by many, underscoring the profound impact of caregiving on mental well-being.

The statistics paint a stark picture: 8.1 million Canadians aged 15 and older are engaged in caregiving for individuals grappling with chronic conditions or age-related concerns¹. The societal landscape reflects extended life expectancy and the consequent increase in caregiving responsibilities, weaving into the fabric of individuals' lives as spouses, parents, employees, and community members. With Canada's aging demographic, this 8.1 million, the number of caregivers will likely increase as rates of dementia and chronic illnesses show an upward rising trend¹.

Caregiver mental health should be integrated into the broader discourse surrounding recovery outcomes. Caregiver mental health is a crucial piece of the recovery puzzle that must not be overlooked⁶. Providing accessible counselling services, respite care, and educational resources can empower caregivers to navigate their roles more effectively. Moreover, it will foster a culture of multi-component support, hope, dignity, self-determination, and responsibility, which are all at the heart of recovery.

Investing in caregiver support systems is not just a moral obligation; it's an investment in the quality of care and the well-being of both caregivers and care recipients. By acknowledging the unique challenges faced by caregivers and providing them with the support they need, we can create a more sustainable and compassionate healthcare ecosystem. It's time to recognize caregivers as indispensable partners in the journey toward recovery and prioritize their mental well-being accordingly.

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