

SEVEN TIPS

For Supporting Caregivers



Caregivers provide assistance to family members and friends with challenges resulting from illness, disability or aging. They provide 80% of the care required by patients living in the community and contribute billions in unpaid labour to our health care system every year.

Though the care they provide is essential, caregivers often go unrecognized and unsupported. This lack of recognition can have a profound impact on the well-being of the caregiver: they have higher rates of depression, stress and are at risk of burnout.

Here are some tips to engage and support the caregivers you meet in your practice:

1. Acknowledge Them

In our patient centred system, it's easy to focus on the patient. One caregiver described her experience as "My name's now 'How's your mother'". Asking the caregiver how they are doing tells them that they matter too.

2. Address Their Experience

Guilt, anger, resentment, sadness and frustration are all common emotions for caregivers. Many caregivers are reluctant to admit that they are experiencing these challenging emotions and, as a result, don't seek help until they are burning out. It is important to normalize those emotions and encourage them to ask for help.

"You seem to be managing well, but a lot of people in your situation find that they start to feel stressed or frustrated. These feelings are normal, and if you start to feel this way, let me know and I can refer you to resources."

3. Help Them Recognize Stress

Caregivers can become so focused on their care recipient that they don't recognize that they have high levels of stress. Self-assessments (such as the AMA self-assessment) can help. If you are using a self-assessment, be sure to encourage the caregiver to discuss the results and next steps with you.



4. Look for Signs of Burnout

- Lacks energy
- Frequently sick
- Always exhausted
- Neglects needs
- Life dominated by caregiving, little time for social connections
- Difficulty relaxing when help is available
- Acts impatient or irritable with their care recipient
- Appears overwhelmed, helpless or hopeless

5. Encourage Self-Care

Help caregivers recognize that they may not have to do everything themselves. Ask them what they are doing for themselves and encourage them to access respite and other caregiver supports.

6. Work with Caregivers

Caregivers spend a lot of time with the care recipient and likely know more about their needs than anyone else. Listen to what they have to say and include them in care planning.

7. Provide Referrals

Navigating the system can be hard. Caregivers often don't know who they should talk to or what resources they should ask for. Don't assume that they are aware of services; sometimes caregivers are unfamiliar with common programs like home care. You don't need to know everything that's available, but help them connect to someone who can help. Here are some key resources to help them connect:

- Caregivers Alberta
- Hospital social workers
- Health Link for access to home care, respite and case management
- Local information and distress lines (for example: 211 in Edmonton)
- Local FCSS offices in rural areas
- Disease and disability-specific organizations (for example: the Alzheimer's Society)
- Seniors outreach workers at local seniors centre

About Caregivers Alberta

We are a charity that aims to empower caregivers and promote their well-being. We provide one-on-one information, referrals and supportive listening, as well as education and support programs for caregivers. Case consultations, professional development training and networking opportunities are available for community services, care providers and professionals.