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CAREGIVER DEPRESSION AND DEMENTIA

The responsibility of taking care of a loved who has been diagnosed with dementia often falls on a family member such as a spouse, child or sibling. Although the caregiving responsibility can be experienced as a loving or meaningful form of duty, the emotional and physical toll should not be understated.

Practicing self-care is vital in maintaining mental health; examples include the following:

1. **Taking a break from caregiving** – respite care in the form of family, friends or a day care programme provides the caregiver time to recharge. In the event that extended periods of respite care is not available, even simple activities such as taking a longer bath, reading a book or gardening can go a long way in providing mental rejuvenation.
2. **Establishing a support system** – Caregivers often have limited time and opportunity to socialize leaving them feeling isolated and depleted. A social support structure is beneficial both as a form of distraction as well as a supportive space in which caregivers can express their feelings. In instances where social support is lacking, caregivers could benefit from joining a support group.
3. **Expressing feelings in the form of writing** – Regular journaling is cathartic. In addition to allowing the caregiver to vent freely without a fear of judgement, the process of journaling is known to reduce depressive symptoms, manage anxiety and improve general well-being.
4. **Engaging in creative pursuits** – Research has proven that engaging in any creative process, such as composing songs, writing poetry, sketching, painting, has healing potential. The creative arts require the caregiver's full attention on the task at hand thereby serving as a useful distraction from everyday thoughts and worries.
5. **Engaging in other meaningful activities** – Depressive feelings become more pronounced as caregivers set aside meaningful activities which previously brought about a sense of joy or contentment. In allowing space to engage in enjoyable activities such as knitting, scrapbooking, exercising, or taking an online course, the mind is redirected to a productive and rewarding task which makes it more difficult to focus on negative emotions.



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Caregivers may not always recognize depressive symptoms in themselves or may find it difficult to acknowledge feeling depressed. It is not, however, uncommon for caregivers to present with depressive symptoms due to the constant demands placed on them while providing care.

Contributing factors that influence caregiver burnout and depression:

- Prioritizing loved one's needs at the expense of the caregiver's own health and well-being
- Limited social support and/or limited opportunity for respite
- Reduced available time to engage in enjoyable activities
- Financial stress
- Lack of sleep
- Disagreements with family members relating to caregiving or other responsibilities

Common signs of depression include the following:

- Feeling tearful, sad, empty or agitated
- Changes in appetite or sleep patterns
- Thoughts of death or suicide
- Ongoing physical symptoms that do not respond to treatment e.g. headaches, pains, etc.
- A loss of activities in people or activities that previously brought pleasure

Depression can have a biological or genetic component in which case medication is recommended to manage chemical imbalances. Many caregivers' depressive symptoms are, however, also brought about by situational influences such as exhaustion and feeling of loss. In this case, caregivers would stand to benefit from a supportive individual counselling space with a trained psychologist.

Kindly contact "Dear Dementia" for further information regarding mental health support for caregivers:

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