



Coping with gradual losses

By Josie Padro

Providing care for a friend or family member can be tremendously rewarding, but it can also be overwhelming. Amid all the practical tasks, caregivers can experience a whole range of emotions. What caregivers may not recognize is that grief may be at the root of many of these feelings. This kind of grief has been given several names – chronic grief, anticipatory grief, or ambiguous loss.

Those caring for a spouse may no longer have their fully functioning life partner, confidant, co-parent. Plans the couple made for the future may no longer be possible. Social ties may be difficult to maintain or may fall away completely.

“My partner is still who she is in some ways but the essence of her is gone,” says James (his name has been changed), whose wife has dementia.

An adult child caring for a parent may no longer be able to rely on that person for emotional support in the same way they have always done. The parent-child relationship may be turned upside down when it’s the adult child who is providing care for the parent. The adjustment can be a difficult for both.

“It’s a journey of losses,” says grief educator and bereavement counsellor Carolyn Main, “when you’re walking along side someone who either has dementia or a physical disease, because the losses are gradual and you have to adapt to each one and mourn each one.”

Though caregivers can’t control the illness or disability of the person they are caring for, there are ways they can cope:

Acknowledge the losses. Realizing that all those emotions are part of the grieving process can help.

Identify your strengths. When we’re feeling overwhelmed it can be difficult to think about what we’re doing right. Taking a moment to think about the things, however minor, that you do well, can help you feel more in control and confident.

Ask for help. There may be people around us, family or friends, who would like to help but need a bit of direction. They may feel more confident if they're asked to do something they know they can do, for example home repairs, driving or playing a game of cards. A number of private agencies in the Lower Mainland provide care and services for seniors and people with disabilities. Seniors' One-Stop at North Shore Community Resources can provide you with a list.

Seek emotional support. A short outing with a friend can provide a meaningful break in the day. Join a caregivers' support group such as NSCR Caregivers' Program, where others in the group can relate to your experiences. The Alzheimer Society runs support groups for spouses, family or friends of those with dementia.

Live in the moment. Caregiver "James" learned new ways to communicate with his wife who was living with dementia. While he missed the intellectual conversations he had with his wife, he learned to communicate with her through touch and the love of music.

Try a creative outlet. Some caregivers find journaling to be effective for sorting out their feelings. Others find painting, singing or playing an instrument, for even brief moments, provides a mental break.

Care for yourself. See Dr. Wolfelt's self-care guidelines (below) for staying physically and mentally healthy.

Dr. Alan Wolfelt of the Centre for Loss and Life Transition in Colorado, has put together a list of bereavement self-care guidelines for caregivers:

I deserve to lead a joyful, whole life.

I am not the only one who can help.

I must develop healthy eating, sleeping and exercise patterns.

I must maintain boundaries in my helping relationships.

I am not perfect and I must not expect myself to be.

I must practice effective time-management skills.

I must practice setting limits and alleviating stresses I can do something about.

I must listen to my inner voice.

I should express the personal me in both my work and play.

I am a spiritual being; I must renew my spirit.