

Male caregivers: reluctant to seek help

by Josie Padro



Across Canada an estimated 4 to 5 million unpaid caregivers provide some form of support to their spouses, friends or neighbours. That support can come in many forms: Physical care, transportation, household chores, attending to financial matters or providing companionship are only a few examples.

Possibly because women live longer, they also make up the majority of those caring for a loved one. Still, the number of male caregivers is significant. In Canada, there is an estimated 1.5 million men who are unpaid caregivers. According to an American organization the Family Caregiver Alliance, men and women over 75 years of age provide about the same amount of care, an average of 35 hours per week. Though we know some of the statistics, we know very little about how men deal with the caregiving role.

Women are likely to cope by reaching out to their network of friends, attending support groups and seeking out community resources; men are often less likely to do so, possibly because they have been brought up with the traditional belief that they should be self-reliant. To make matters worse, men report feeling less confident about the quality of care they are giving compared to their female counterparts. It can all add up to burnout, deterioration in health and poor quality of life.

For the last five years Robert Simpson, whose name has been changed to protect his privacy, has been caring for his wife who has Alzheimer's disease. As her disease

progressed, so did the demands of caring for her. When her symptoms became severe, almost two years ago, she was placed in a care facility. However, it was different while his wife was living in the couple's home.

While his wife was living in the couple's home, Mr. Simpson rearranged his work schedule to care for her, and even though friends offered to help, he was hesitant to take it. "My experience," he says, "has been that women are more likely to reach out for help than men. Men say if it ain't broke, don't fix it." Mr. Simpson had re-organized his schedule to care for her, and even though friends offered to help, he was hesitant to take it. "My experience," he says, "has been that women are more likely to reach out for help than men. Men say if it ain't broke, don't fix it."

Mr. Simpson says he experienced a huge range of emotions as his relationship changed. As his wife's disease progressed, he found he was becoming frustrated and saddened at his inability to communicate with her as he once did. The lively conversations they had enjoyed were no longer possible. "My partner is still who she is in some ways, but the essence of her is gone. How do you grieve for someone who is still there?" he wonders.

Men's group facilitator Dean Rath believes men are conditioned to suppress their feelings of grief. He uses storytelling and drumming workshops to help men get explore their emotions. In his 20 years of experience he's found that men-only groups provide a nonjudgmental setting where participants can let down their guard and discover others share similar experiences. That in itself can be extremely healing, he says.

Mr. Simpson found support through regular meetings with his counsellor. He also joined a support group for caregivers and support group for husbands. He has some advice for men who are caregiving, "Don't be afraid to reach out for help to help you looking after your partner – don't be afraid to talk about your feelings and your difficulties."

It's advice that may take some courage to follow, but in the end it could lead to better health for men and those they care for.

Sources of support for *all* caregivers

North Shore Community Resources Caregiver Program. Contact them by email at karyn.davies@nscr.bc.ca or by phone at 604-985-7138.

North Shore Family Services offers counselling to people of all ages. Cost is by sliding scale. Contact them by email at family@familyservices.bc.ca or by phone at 604-988-5281.

Living Systems Counselling is a non-profit organization that provides counselling to individuals and families. Fees by sliding scale. Contact them by email at livingsystems@telus.net or by phone at 604-926-5496.

Group Facilitator Dean Rath, deanrath@telus.com or www.innerrhythmdrumming.com