



Navigating New Terrain: The Male Caregiver's Journey

By Cassandra Van Dyck

"If you love someone, you'll be a caregiver.

If you live long enough, you'll need one."

– Peter Rosenberger

Are you a husband, son, uncle, nephew, or male friend caring for a loved one? Chances are, you may feel alone – but you are not. The number of male caregivers in Canada is growing, and they face some unique challenges. Many people have the capability to be a caring, loving, supportive caregiver, no matter their gender. However, most folks grow up in households, and most likely a culture, that sees females as the primary caregivers. "...I think that anybody who is a Mom has years of valuable training and experience that many men don't have as they lack that experience of caring for someone," says George, who cared for three of his parents. Gender roles in our society are shifting. Men are staying home with their children while their partners go to work, and they are caring for their wives, sisters, parents and friends when they need help.

Of course, being a caregiver for a loved one is a different experience than staying home with a child. The caregiving role often comes unexpectedly and thrusts men in to a situation they were not prepared for. "The biggest challenge which drains you emotionally is first not knowing what to do and then wondering if you're doing the right thing," says George. This is a common feeling for caregivers, but could it be intensified for males? "I don't know whether Mr. Fix-It is hardwired into our genes or drummed into our skulls, but this one stereotype that holds true across the board. Psychologists, social workers, medical doctors, breast cancer survivors [...] all agree. Guys feel compelled to 'fix...'" writes Marc Silver, in *Breast Cancer Husband*.

This is not to say that a “fix it” attitude is a negative one to have. The urge to fix can solve lots of practical problems, such as sorting out finances and care. Two of George’s parents had dementia, and he feels strongly that an education package for caregivers would be a huge help in managing the diagnosis and preparing for the changes ahead. “A practical guide tailored to the disease would be very useful which might include things like the hourly routines and log books of medicine administered, etc. “Also, emergency numbers that can help 24 hours a day.” George says that what helped him most in his caregiving journey was educating himself on his parents’ diagnosis and creating a care plan, which felt overwhelming to him at first. George acknowledges that while an education package would help people care for their loved one, having one would not help ease the emotional burden on caregivers.

A recent article by AARP was titled The Hidden Male Caregiver. The article cites that 40% of caregivers are male. So why are they hidden? “I think men may see it as a sign of weakness if you have to ask for help. It’s like you’re appointed a project manager for a major project and you have no idea what you’re doing and you have no idea where to start and you know you have to get going right away,” says George. Another reason for the “hidden males” may be the hesitation of some men to identify as caregivers, even though they providing emotional, physical or financial support for a loved one.

If you are a male caregiver, there are some things you can do to help ease some of the pressure of caring for a loved one.

Listen to what your body is telling you.

“When you feel the hormone that stress produces in your body building up (cortisol) I used to use walking to burn it off. Also using an iPod with headphones with some good bass seemed to drain some of the stress away,” says George. Listening to your body and paying attention to the rise of cortisol can help you to manage it. When the stress hormone surges, you might feel a tightness in your throat and have trouble focusing. When this feeling sticks around, it can disrupt sleep and make it hard to make decisions and think rationally. Going for a walk (like George suggested), meditating, hiking, or singing loudly are great ways to get rid of excess cortisol.

Spend time doing the things that make you happy, even if it’s just for a little while.

Make your hobbies a priority. “Taking time for yourself is one of the things that most never do for lack of energy, time or money. That’s why it is so good to have a hobby. It’s personal and mandates you to spend time with yourself,” advises George.

Take advantage of networking groups and education sessions.

Groups can help to ease feelings of isolation. Consider attending just once, even if it is something out of your comfort zone, to see what it’s like. Sometimes attending a group can feel overwhelming, but many find comfort and companionship once they’re there. Networking can

provide invaluable resources for caregivers, such as emotional support, ideas, and tips for self-care.

Read a book.

If you enjoy reading, there are several books about caregiving from a male perspective.

Caregiving can be a tough role to step in to, but its rewards are deep. George reflects, “Knowing that you were taking care of someone in their darkest hours and that they had taken care of you all your life. It was nice to be able to give back even though the sorrow was often overwhelming.”