

Finding Balance: Caregiving and Working

By Cassandra Van Dyck



Caring for a loved one can come with many financial, emotional, and physical stressors. These stressors are often compounded when a caregiver is still in the work force. Trying to care for a family member or friend while maintaining adequate job performance can be challenging. Caregivers often need to respond to emergencies, drive their care partner to appointments, cook and clean, and assist with personal care such as bathing and changing. These responsibilities, combined with emotions such as guilt, worry, and sadness that come with caring for an ailing loved one, can make it difficult to make it to work on time (if at all) and keep productivity high. In British Columbia, 70% of its one million caregivers are working full or part-time. If you are part of this percentile, you may feel overwhelmed and frustrated. “Only one in seventy midsize to larger companies know how to address this issue,” says Gema G. Hernandez, D.P.A. Advocating for yourself in a company without proper policies in place may seem daunting, but there is hope.

Asking for Help

Employers are far more likely to offer support and accommodation if they understand your situation. If you are struggling at work, make an appointment with your employer or human resources manager. Explain your concerns and limitations and try to offer solutions. If you are having a hard time finding the words, try the following phrase:

“I have been providing care for my spouse (or friend/mother/father) for a while and am noticing it’s affecting my ability to do my job. I would like to explore some options with you to see if there are adjustments I can make so I can work to the best of my abilities.”

Flex-time, a compressed work week, a leave of absence, or reduced hours may be options. Your employer may have some suggestions as well. Look in to your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) to see if there is free counseling available to you. Many programs will provide support over the phone if you are struggling to find time to attend appointments.

You may be entitled to Compassionate Care Benefits, a form of Employment Insurance available through Human Resources and Social Development Canada (HRSDC). These benefits are available to employed family members caring for a gravely ill relative at risk of dying within twenty-six weeks. The benefits consist of six weeks' total compensation. Your employer cannot legally fire you because you need to take time off.

Sharing the Load

When caring for a loved one, there will always be some-thing more you can do. There will be more appointments, more cleaning, more cooking... the list goes on. It is important to know where to set your boundaries and how to get help so you have a better chance of feeling present at work and be able to take care of yourself.

If there are other friends or family members that can help, arrange a meeting with them to discuss sharing tasks. Create a calendar of appointments and split up driving, so you don't have to miss work as often. Look in to respite options. Some facilities will host your loved one for days or weeks, while other services can provide adult day programs or home visits.

Here are some helpful resources for respite and support:

Seniors Peer Support: North Shore Neighbourhood House: NSNH offers a peer support program for seniors that provides volunteers for seniors to talk to about life challenges and changes, as well as providing resources. For more information, call Lorna Harding at 604-982-8333.

North Shore Volunteers for Seniors: NSVS provides peer support and programming for seniors. Programs include: chair exercise, computer support, and walking groups. For more information, call 604-922-1575.

Adult Day Programs (VCH): Adult Day Programs are focused on health, social stimulation and therapeutic recreational programs in support group settings. Clients attend for many reasons – caregiver and family respite, waiting residential placement, health status monitoring, etc. There are two locations on the North Shore. For more information, call 604-983-6700.

Lotsa Helping Hands: An online calendar that helps helpers coordinate tasks and appointments for loved ones. Visit lotsahelpinghands.com

Self-Care

Knowing your rights, resources, and exploring options with your employer can be helpful, but practicing self-care will help you cope more effectively with the daily challenges of working and caregiving. If you spend your days in an office and your evenings with your care partner, you may feel that you don't have time to do the

things that make you feel happy and relaxed. Fortunately, allowing time for self-care does not need to take too much time and can be incorporated into a busy work/life schedule.

Try spending ten-twenty minutes of your lunch break outside. You could go for a walk, or just sit on a bench without distractions and take in the world around you. Eat slowly and savour the various flavours.

Call a friend that makes you smile.

Spend five minutes writing down everything you are grateful for.

Play an instrument or sing along to a favourite song.

Take a bath before bed.

Spend just a small amount of time every day doing something that makes you happy.

A Final Thought

Admitting you are struggling is often a very hard thing to do, especially when you need to speak to an employer.

Remember that everyone has (or will have at some point) a loved one who needs care. Reach out when you need support and take advantage of available resources.

