

Caregiving in the era of COVID-19: What to expect, and how to cope

While caring for a family member who is living with a mental health problem or illness can be rewarding, it can also be tiring, demanding work. As the COVID-19 pandemic sparks new concerns for everyone, caregivers must contend with a host of unique challenges, on top of an already full plate.

Together with Mary Anne Levasseur, coordinator and peer facilitator of [PEPP-Montreal](#), Ella Amir, executive director of [AMI-Quebec](#), and [OFCAN](#) chair Cynthia Clark, the Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) has compiled the following tips to help carers navigate this challenging period.

1. Accept that some things are out of your control

Control is at a premium right now, because we are surrounded by unknowns and what-ifs. The sooner we accept the things we cannot control, the more energy we will have for the things we can. As a caregiver, this might mean accepting that your routine with the person you care for isn't possible within the constraints of public health measures and finding a new, more flexible routine. It might also mean accepting that you don't know how long physical distancing measures will last and focusing on connecting by phone and reassuring your loved one that the separation is temporary.

2. Expect some changes from your loved one

The combination of stress and uncertainty from the pandemic may mean that current mental health problems will worsen or new ones will form. Escalating symptoms, when coupled with personal fear or anxiety, could make caregiving much more challenging in the months to come. If it does, remind yourself that any worsening of symptoms, as challenging as it may be, is natural in such trying circumstances.

3. Draw upon past resilience

Being a caregiver takes great resilience. Reflect on your journey thus far, and remind yourself what you've overcome to get to this point. While COVID-19 has caused unprecedented global disruption, it's important to remember that, as a caregiver, this isn't the first time you've had to adjust your routine. In fact, you're probably more adaptable than most. Take comfort in the knowledge that you've proven your ability to withstand hardship.

4. Make time for self-care

Self-care is non-negotiable for caregivers. Although, like many, you may be inclined to put your own needs last, you need to take care of yourself before you can effectively support another person. Whether that means walking in nature, sleeping in, listening to music, or anything else to improve your well-being, self-care is integral to caring for someone else. Like the oxygen mask instructions on an airplane — you must secure your own supply before turning to help others.

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5. Reach out to fellow caregivers

No one understands the hardships of caregiving better than another caregiver. If you have other carers in your life, consider reaching out to them. Talk openly about how the coronavirus has affected your routine with your loved one, what your biggest concerns are, and anything you've found helpful so far. Listening to these things in return will not only create a reciprocal support system, it will also provide some of the human connection we could all use more of right now.

6. Find support resources available online or by phone

Just as several outpatient services have been put on hold for people with mental illness, so too have many support services for caregivers. Fortunately, some organizations have shifted their services to online or telephone platforms. One example is [PLEO](#), a non-profit organization that supports parents of children facing mental health challenges, which has moved all support groups to online video conferencing and continues to offer its other services by phone. [AMI-Quebec](#) has also transitioned all its programs, including support groups, workshops, and individual counselling, to telephone or video-conferencing platforms.

To find online mental health supports in your area, contact your local branch of the [Canadian Mental Health Association](#). The MHCC has also developed a [list of resources](#) from across the country to help families and family caregivers of persons living with a mental health problem or illness.

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