



National Behavioral Health Network

for Tobacco & Cancer Control

from NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR
MENTAL WELLBEING

You're Not Alone — Resources for Cancer Care Partners

INTRODUCTION

When someone is living with both cancer and a behavioral health challenge such as depression, anxiety or a substance use disorder, it can make everything feel harder, including how they navigate their cancer care and whom they reach out for help. The challenges faced by people with co-occurring cancer and behavioral health diagnoses can affect their ability to cope with treatment, how they feel about themselves and how they connect with others. They may need support to stay on track, an empathetic ear or even someone to assist with their daily activities. That's where care partners come in.

WHO IS A CARE PARTNER?

There are several terms used to describe someone who provides care to another person, including *caregiver*, *care partner* and even *co-survivor* (McGillivray et al., 2021). While these terms may carry subtle differences in meaning, they all refer to individuals who help someone manage their daily needs due to illness, disability or other challenges. Being a *care partner*, a loved one helping someone through cancer, is an act of courage, compassion and commitment. Whether it's a family member, close friend or chosen support person, the role is essential. While often unpaid and unrecognized, care shapes every stage of the healing journey. This resource uses the term *care partner* to honor the collaborative nature of this relationship — one built on mutual trust, respect and love. It offers guidance, insight and tools to support both the partner and the loved one along the way.



THE IMPORTANCE OF CARE PARTNERS

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), **about 1 in 5 adults in the U.S. provide unpaid care to another person**, with half of them doing so for at least two years (CDC, 2018). Care partners play a vital role in supporting the health and wellbeing of people with a cancer diagnosis. Their responsibilities often include (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2016):



Assisting with daily activities such as managing medications.



Offering companionship and emotional support.



Helping with bathing and hygiene needs.



Coordinating care.



Maintaining a clean and safe living environment.



Advocating on behalf of the care recipient.



Providing transportation to and from medical appointments and treatments.

CARING FOR SOMEONE WITH CANCER — WHAT IT MEANS FOR YOUR WELLBEING

There is no universal experience for those who provide care to others. Being a care partner can be deeply rewarding; however, it comes with high physical, mental and emotional demands which, when experienced over an extended period of time, can negatively impact the health and wellbeing of the person providing support (Schulz & Sherwood, 2008). A care partner may experience physical strain or injury from assisting with daily living tasks, as well as mental and emotional stress. Caregiving responsibilities can also disrupt social relationships and lead to changes in health-related behaviors, such as neglecting self-care or engaging in harmful coping mechanisms that further affect overall health (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2016).

COMPASSION FATIGUE

When someone serves in a role that demands a high degree of empathy for an extended period, they may start to have difficulty engaging with others in a compassionate way. This indicates that they are experiencing compassion fatigue, which may include signs such as (Figley, 2002):

- Feeling unable to cope with others' challenges or suffering.
- Experiencing extreme physical, mental and emotional exhaustion.
- Withdrawing from social connection.
- Feeling increasingly irritable or anxious.

Several strategies can help mitigate the risk of developing compassion fatigue, including (Canadian Medical Association, 2020):



Regularly practicing mindfulness and meditation.



Engaging in physical activity.



Learning stress-management techniques.



Getting adequate sleep.



Maintaining a consistent self-care routine.



Fostering connections within one's social support network.

While these strategies may be protective, it is important to seek guidance from a qualified mental health professional if signs of compassion fatigue emerge or persist.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SELF-CARE FOR CARE PARTNERS

Being a care partner doesn't mean doing it all; it means doing what you can. Setting boundaries, asking for help and taking breaks are acts of love, too. Every care partner's experience is unique, shaped by their relationship to the person receiving care, the nature of the illness and their own personal circumstances. To preserve one's own wellbeing, it is essential for care partners to establish appropriate boundaries and set realistic expectations for themselves and for what kind of care they can provide (Family Caregivers Online, 2021). There are many resources available to support care partners, some of which are shared in the next section, however sometimes caring for oneself means taking a break. In these instances, respite care can be a valuable option to allow care partners to take a temporary break from caregiving and focus on their own wellbeing needs. This can be coordinated when multiple family members take turns assuming the role of care partner, or it can be provided by a professional service.

SUPPORT FOR THE SUPPORTERS

Care partners play a key role in meeting the physical, mental and emotional needs of those for which they provide support; however, they must also prioritize their own health and wellness. Below are a few resources that can be used to support those who support others:

Support networks

- [**Caregiver Action Network**](#) provides free education, peer support and resources to help care partners navigate the challenges of caregiving.
- [**The Care Partner Project**](#) equips care partners with practical tools, such as checklists, educational resources and community programs to help them actively participate in their loved ones' health care.
- [**National Alliance for Caregiving**](#) offers initiatives that support care partners' health and wellbeing, amplify their voices and advocate for large-scale changes.
- [**Today's Caregiver**](#) offers a comprehensive platform featuring articles, newsletters and resources tailored for care partners.

Guides

- [**American Cancer Society Caregiver Resource Guide**](#) is a comprehensive resource to help care partners of someone with a cancer diagnosis navigate their journey.
- [**When Someone You Love Is Being Treated for Cancer: Support for Caregivers**](#), from the National Cancer Institute, provides guidance and self-care strategies for friends and family members caring for a loved one with cancer, focusing on managing emotions, seeking support and maintaining personal wellbeing throughout the caregiving journey.
- [**A Guide for Caregivers**](#), from Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, offers information and support to help caregivers of people with cancer navigate the emotional, physical and practical challenges of their role while promoting a positive caregiving experience.
- [**The Learning Center at the MD Anderson Cancer Center**](#) offers curated research guides and educational resources developed by health educators. These guides cover a wide range of topics, including cancer types, treatment options and coping strategies.

Resources

- [**Resources for Caregivers**](#), from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, provides a centralized collection of resources to support care partners.
- [**ARCH National Respite Network and Resource Center's National Respite Locator Service**](#) assists care partners in finding local respite care providers that match their specific needs.
- [**CaringInfo**](#), from the National Alliance for Care at Home, provides resources to educate and empower patients and care partners to make informed decisions about serious illness and end-of-life care.



CONCLUSION

Care partners play a critical role in supporting people with cancer, offering essential help with daily tasks, emotional support and advocacy. Although rewarding, partnering with someone to meet their health needs is physically, mentally and emotionally demanding, and it is important for care partners to recognize the impact this can have on their own health. While the challenges may seem overwhelming at times, care partners are not alone. There are many resources, strategies and support networks available to help navigate this journey. By taking advantage of these tools and prioritizing self-care, care partners can maintain their own wellbeing while continuing to provide valuable support to their loved ones.

Visit [Caregiver Action Network](#) or call 855-227-3640 for help or immediate support.



References

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