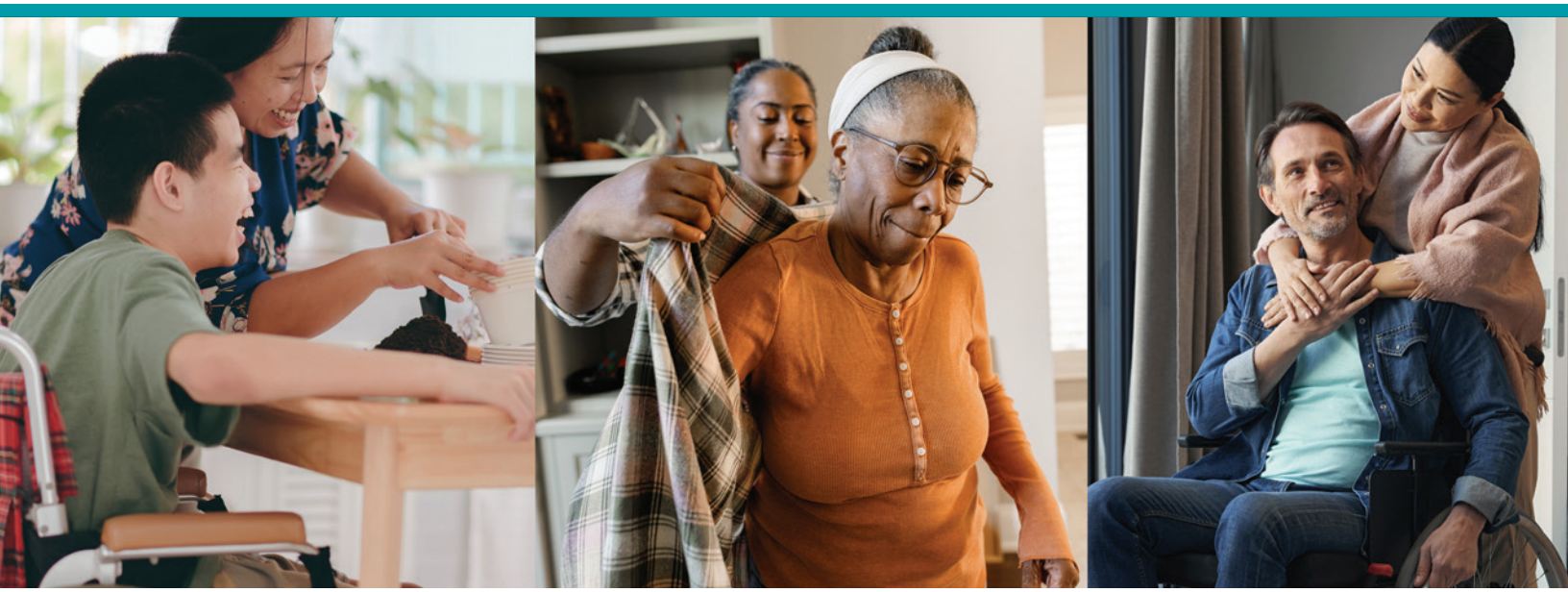
ABC Health Matters

Healthy Caregiving



ABC LifeLiteracyCanada

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ABC Health Matters

Welcome to *ABC Health Matters*!

ABC Health Matters is a program about **health literacy**. Our health is one of the most important things in our life. The health of our family and friends is also important to us.

Our health impacts every other part of our life. By taking charge of our health, we can make our life easier and better. We can also improve the lives of the people we care about.

Health literacy is the ability to understand and use health information to take care of our health and make decisions about it.

Healthy Caregiving

This workshop is about keeping yourself healthy while you're caregiving for someone else.

Caregivers are important. The help and support of a caregiver can improve the quality of life and independence of a person who needs care. Caregiving can also be hard work. Caregivers need to take care of themselves and their own mental health.

In this workshop, you will learn about:

- What caregiving is
- Why mental health matters
- Ways you can take care of your mental health as a caregiver

We hope that this workshop gives you useful information and tools to help you feel confident taking care of yourself. After all, your health matters.

What is a caregiver?

Everyone needs **caregivers** to help them at different stages of life. Infants need caregivers because they're too small to do things for themselves. People who are sick or injured need caregivers to help them with tasks that have become more difficult.

A **caregiver** is a person who helps someone with a health problem, a disability, a mental illness, or needs related to aging.

Some caregivers are paid and do this work as a job. Other caregivers are unpaid and provide care because of a relationship to the person receiving care. For example:

- A parent cares for their children
- A care aide cares for residents at a seniors' home
- An adult cares for their elderly parent

What do caregivers do?

Caregivers provide practical help and support. Here are some examples of what caregivers do:

- Wash dishes
- Clean the home
- Grocery shopping and cooking
- Take people to appointments
- Help with bathing
- Help with using the toilet
- Communicate with health care professionals
- Monitor medications and other health care treatments
- Provide emotional support

The relationship between a caregiver and a care recipient is very meaningful. Caregiving requires closeness, honesty, and vulnerability. Caregivers and care recipients often have strong bonds. They often care deeply about each other.

Let's talk about it

- Who are the people in your life that you care for?
- What kinds of caregiving activities do you do?
- Can a person who is sick be their own caregiver? Why or why not?

Caregiving can be hard work

Being a caregiver can be rewarding. It can feel good to help someone. And spending time together might help you feel closer to the person you're caring for.

But caregiving isn't always easy. There might be hard work involved. And it can be tough knowing someone you love is sick or in pain. It's especially hard when you are someone's caregiver for a long period of time.

Caregiving can make your life harder, too. You might feel:

- Changes to your **mental health**
- Big emotions
- Extra **stress**
- **Burnout**

Mental health means how well we're able to cope with challenges in our lives, whether they have to do with work, family, friendships, or other events.

Stress is the pressure and tension we feel from challenges in our lives.

Burnout happens when you deal with too much stress for too long. When you're burnt out, you might feel very tired, angry, or like you don't care about things you used to care about.

Your mental health matters

Your mental health will change over time. Some life experiences involve stress and loss. In those moments, your mental health might get worse. It's very important to pay attention to your mental health. It is just as important as your physical health. If you ignore your mental health challenges, they can get worse.

It's hard to be a good caregiver if you don't feel healthy and supported. That's why it's important to take care of yourself too! Knowing ahead of time that things might get stressful helps you to be prepared and to be a better caregiver.

There are things you can do to protect and improve your mental health. You can talk to a **health care provider** about your mental health. If you're struggling, a health care provider can help you find the right kind of support. They can help you protect and improve your mental health.

Health care providers are professionals you can talk to about your mental and physical health. They can answer your questions and offer support.

Let's talk about it

- When you experience stress or loss, what kind of support helps you?
- Who do you talk to when you need to talk about your feelings, emotions, or mental health?

Recognizing signs of mental health challenges

Caregivers pay close attention to the person or people they are caring for. Sometimes, caregivers are so busy helping other people that they may not reach out for help for themselves. But getting this help is important. Getting support helps caregivers be able to keep helping their loved ones.

It's important to pay attention to yourself and your feelings. Learning your own limits and knowing when to ask for help can help you take care of your own mental health.

Here are some signs you might be struggling with your mental health:

- Changes in when or how much you eat and sleep
- Changes in your mood
- Difficulty concentrating
- Difficulty with your usual responsibilities
- Feeling excessively fearful or worried
- Spending more time alone or avoiding friends or social situations
- Feeling tired
- Changes in your body weight
- Hearing or seeing things that other people can't hear or see
- Thoughts of hurting yourself
- Thoughts of hurting someone else

Have you noticed any of these changes in your own life? It's a good idea to talk to your health care provider. You can tell your doctor about the changes you've seen. You can also tell them about the caregiving work you're doing. They can connect you to health professionals who can help you get support for your mental health.

When a mental health challenge is an emergency

A mental health emergency might look like:

- Feeling very low, sad, or out of control
- Having thoughts of hurting yourself or someone else

You can call 911 for a mental health emergency. It's just like calling 911 for a medical emergency. You can also go to a hospital's emergency room to get help.

Sometimes, when people feel very sad or overwhelmed, they might think about ending their life. If you have these kinds of thoughts, it's very important to get help.

Canada has a national hotline to help people who need help with a mental health emergency.

If you are having thoughts about hurting yourself, you can get help by calling **988**.

Talking about mental health

Lots of people struggle with mental health. One out of five Canadians experiences a mental health challenge every year.

But it can be hard to talk about mental health challenges. Some people experience **stigma** related to mental health.

Stigma is a negative attitude about something. When there is stigma around an issue, people might be uncomfortable talking about it.

There is stigma around mental health challenges and talking about mental health. That can make it harder to talk about mental health and get help for mental health challenges. It can be lonely to feel like you can't talk to anyone about your struggles.

Let's talk about it

- Why might someone not ask for help with their mental health?
- Who can you talk to when you are feeling down or worried about your mental health?

There are lots of people you can talk to about your mental health:

- Your doctor
- Your therapist or counsellor
- 988
- 911

You can also talk to a friend or family member. Talking to someone you care about and who cares about you can help in a difficult moment.

Talking to a therapist

Therapy or counselling can help you improve your mental health or help with a mental health problem. Your doctor can help you find a **therapist** or **counsellor** who is right for you.

A **therapist** or a **counsellor** is a person who has training to help with mental health challenges. They will ask you about your situation and let you talk about your problems.

Therapy can help you:

- Feel less sad and tired every day
- Deal with stress better
- Learn how to talk to someone you care about without fighting

Your therapist won't make you do anything you're uncomfortable with. They also won't share the information you tell them with others. They won't judge you or blame you for the way that you feel. They want you to feel safe.

If you don't like your therapist or don't feel comfortable with them, you can find someone else. It's important to find a therapist who is a good fit for you.

If you start seeing a therapist, you may not feel better right away. Therapy is a process. It can take time, and you may need other support. If you need other help, your therapist can recommend resources. For example, they can suggest seeing a psychiatrist if they think medication could help you.

Resilience and coping

People respond differently to stress and loss. The ability to recover from stress and loss is called **resilience**. People with strong resilience skills are able to **cope** well with difficult changes.

Resilience is the ability to adapt to or recover from difficult situations. Resilience helps you deal with stress and challenges.

To **cope** means to deal with problems or stressful situations.

Resilience is a skill like cooking or riding a bike. That means it's something you have to learn and practice. The more you practice being resilient, the easier it will be.

Here are some ways you can build your resilience skills:

- Learn new coping strategies
- Practice self-care
- Move your body
- Connect with other people
- Become an advocate
- Connect with nature
- Use your senses
- Breathe deeply
- Write in a journal

Do some of these things sound new to you? That's okay. We'll learn a little bit about each one in the next pages.

Coping strategies

Caregiving can be hard. **Coping strategies** can help make it easier to handle challenges. Learning what coping strategies work for you is part of growing your resilience skills.

Coping strategies help you lower your stress. They can help you feel better and handle challenges more easily.

It's important to choose coping strategies that are healthy. Healthy coping strategies help you feel better right away and over time. Here are some examples of healthy coping strategies:

- Going for walk or hike
- Exercising, like doing yoga or lifting weights
- Talking to a trusted friend
- Taking deep breaths
- Focusing on one of your five senses, like smell or touch

Some common coping strategies aren't healthy. For example, some people try to deal with stress by driving really fast, drinking a lot of alcohol, using drugs, or eating more than feels good. These strategies can put your health or the health of other people at risk. They might make you feel better right away, but in the long term they will make you feel worse.

Let's talk about it

- What are some coping strategies you find helpful to deal with stress?
- Is there a new coping strategy you'd like to try?

Self-Care

Doing things that bring you pleasure and make you feel happy can also build your resilience skills. Sometimes we call this **self-care**.

Self-care is an important part of taking care of your health. Taking care of your mental health is as important as taking care of your physical health. It's okay and important for caregivers to practice self-care.

Self-care is doing activities that reduce stress, help you relax, and bring you pleasure. Self-care is part of taking care of your mental health.

Here are some examples of self-care activities that can help you have good mental health:

- Exercise, like walking or yoga
- Listening to music
- Connecting with nature in a park
- Gardening
- Having a bath or shower
- Writing in a diary or journal
- Playing sports with friends
- Connecting with people you care about
- Connecting with animals
- Noticing your strengths

Let's talk about it

- What helps you feel relaxed or happy?
- What are two activities you really enjoy doing?
- What are some activities you used to enjoy that you don't have time for anymore?
- How could you add these activities back into your life?

Move your body

Moving your body is not only good for keeping your joints and muscles healthy, it's also good for your mental health. Exercise can also improve your concentration, alertness, and overall brain function.

Exercise produces brain chemicals that reduce pain, improve sleep, and reduce stress. You can enjoy these benefits by doing low or moderate intensity exercise. Here's a way to tell if you're exercising at low or moderate intensity:

- If you can talk and sing without feeling out of breath, you're doing low intensity exercise
- If you can talk but you can't comfortably sing, you're doing moderate intensity exercise.

Here are some ideas to help you fit exercise and movement into a busy schedule. You can add your own ideas to the end of the list.

- Take movement breaks in between caregiving activities
- Do small exercises with the person in your care
- Go for a walk together if you can
- Climb the stairs in your home or apartment building
- Do active housework like vacuuming or sweeping
- Stretch or do yoga exercises when you have a few minutes
- _____
- _____

Are there other ways you can fit movement into your life?

Connect with other people

Caregivers can reach out to other people with similar experiences, like other caregivers. Building a community of people who understand what caregiving is like means that you can turn to them for support.

Social connection is an important part of wellbeing. Without it, we can feel lonely and isolated.

Social connection means the relationships you have with the people in your life. They could be family members, friends, co-workers, or people you meet in a group or club. You might see them in person or talk to them on the phone or online.

People who feel socially connected are less likely to feel a lot of worry or feel depressed. They are twice as likely to have a long life and they recover from being sick faster. Social connections are very powerful.

Let's talk about it

- Can you think of three people who are your social connections?
- What are some things you enjoy doing with those people?
- If someone has a hard time making social connections, what advice would you give them?

Become an advocate

When you or someone you love is sick, it's important to **advocate** for yourself or your loved one in healthcare settings. Advocating helps you get the best care possible.

Advocating means taking charge of your health. It means asking for help so you can meet your health needs.

You don't always have to advocate by yourself. Advocacy groups and organizations can help tell the government more help is needed. Caregivers can advocate for the person receiving care, and can also advocate for more support for caregivers.

Connecting with an advocacy organization can help you take control of your future. Group advocacy can help you feel heard, capable, purposeful, and connected. Group advocacy can be a way to improve your sense of wellbeing and mental health.

Let's talk about it

- Do you know other people who have the same illness or medical issues as the person you care for?
- Have you ever talked to someone from an advocacy organization?
- If someone doesn't know about advocacy organizations in their area, where could they start to look for one?

Connect with nature

Many people have had the experience of feeling better after spending time in a natural environment like a park, beach, or forest. Nature can help us feel connected and healthy, and it can reduce stress.

Noticing the nature around us can help improve our physical and mental health. Try to think about what you smell, feel or hear.

Can you think of a place where you can connect with nature?

Try this

Go outside and find a place to sit. Spend five minutes looking around and noticing what you see. When the five minutes are up, ask yourself:

- What did I notice?
- How do I feel?

Use your senses

Many people have five senses:

- taste
- smell
- touch
- hearing
- seeing

Our senses are tools that we can use anytime to help us cope with stress, worry, fear, and other uncomfortable feelings. When we're feeling overwhelmed, we can use our senses to help refocus our attention, quiet our mind, and lower our stress.

Meet James

When James is very worried, he feels like his mind is racing. He thinks about his problems and envisions the worst possible outcomes.

Luckily, James has learned some good coping strategies. James decides to do an exercise called 5, 4, 3, 2, 1. To do this exercise, he names 5 things he can see, 4 things he can feel, 3 things he can hear, 2 things he can smell, and 1 thing he can taste. As James does the exercise, he feels his breathing and heart rate slow down. He starts to feel like he can think more carefully and slowly about his situation.

Let's try it

Can you name:

- 5 things you can see
- 4 things you can feel
- 3 things you can hear
- 2 things you can smell
- 1 thing you can taste

Breathe deeply

Has someone ever told you to take a deep breath when you're feeling nervous or worried? This is good advice. Breathing deeply and paying attention to each breath can help reduce stress.

Some of the benefits of deep breathing are:

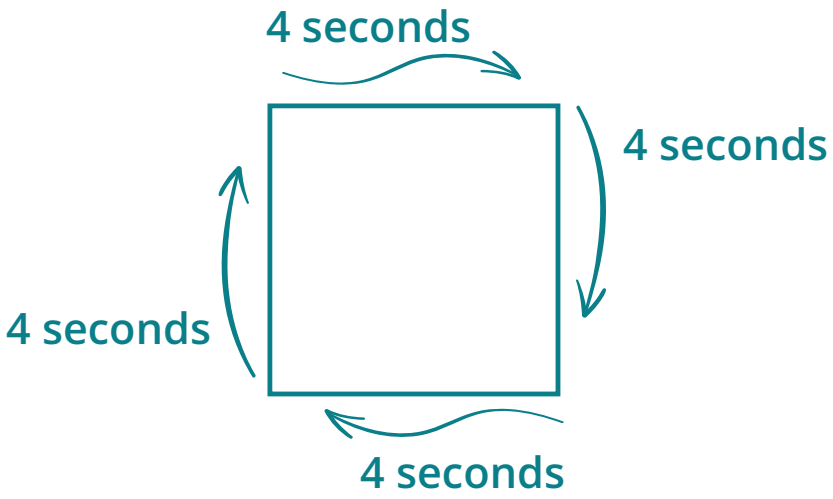
- Lowers your blood pressure
- Calms your mind
- Relaxes your body

There are many different types of deep breathing exercises. One exercise is called Box Breathing.

Box Breathing

1. Find a comfortable place to sit or lie down
2. Place one hand on your chest and the other on your stomach
3. Breathe in through your nose for 4 seconds. Try to let your belly expand as you breathe in
4. Hold your breath for 4 seconds
5. Breathe out for 4 seconds
6. Hold for 4 seconds
7. Repeat

You can imagine each count of 4 seconds as one side of a square box.



Write in a journal

Figuring out how to deal with stress can be a lot of work. Especially if you're feeling overwhelmed!

Writing down your thoughts and feelings can help you better understand your situation. A notebook or journal can be a powerful tool to help you figure out what you need help with and what to do next.

Benefits of writing in a journal include:

- **Tracking your thoughts.** This can help you see what does and doesn't help you when things feel hard.
- **Identifying sources of stress.** Sometimes it isn't clear why you feel upset or overwhelmed. Writing down what happened and how you feel can help you figure out where stress is coming from and if you can do anything to change it.
- **Recognizing your strengths.** Writing down what happened also lets you reflect on what's going well. Noticing what's working can help you figure out how to keep going.

When you know what causes your stress, you can make a plan to do something about it. A health care professional can help you make changes to reduce your stress. You can show your journal to the health care professional if it helps you explain your feelings and needs.

Try keeping a journal

Writing in a journal might sound like a lot of work, but it doesn't have to be. Try it and see how it makes you feel. Use the journal template below to think about what happened in your life yesterday.

What happened	How I felt about it
• • •	• • •
One thing I did well:	
One thing I did to take care of myself:	

Take a minute to review what you wrote. You don't have to share it with anyone else.

Did anything surprise you?

Look back

Taking care of your mental health is an important way to keep yourself healthy. Taking care of yourself is very important, especially if you're a caregiver for someone else.

Think about the resilience skills we talked about today. You can look back at the list on page 10 if you need help to remember. Some of these are things you probably do already. It's good to remember the skills that we already have. And to work to build new ones.

Let's talk about it

- Which of the resilience skills are ones you already use?
- Did you learn anything new that will be helpful?
- How will you use the information you learned today?

Congratulations!

You've completed the *ABC Health Matters* workbook on keeping yourself healthy as a caregiver. You've taken the next step in managing your health.

For the last activity, we hope you will make a **pledge**. The pledge can be personal or you can share it with others.

A **pledge** is a serious promise to yourself or others.

My pledge

I pledge to take care of myself by:

Sometimes a pledge needs an action plan: a list of steps you'll take to make your pledge happen.

My action plan

What I will do differently is:

What I can do right now is:

What I will do in the next six months is: