

You are Not Alone
Support for Friends and Family who are Caregivers
A conversation with those caring for someone with a mental illness
Maureen Osis, Nurse, Family Therapist
Sponsored by
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You are **not alike** – but you are **not alone**.

You are *not alike* because each of you is a unique individual – age, gender, culture, experience, and you are on your personal journey with someone who has a mental illness.

You are *not alike* because your family member is also a unique individual – with an illness that has symptoms in common with others, but personality and experiences that are different from others.

But you are *not alone* because you have shared knowledge: you understand the stigma of mental illness; you know what it is like to try to find appropriate treatment and services; you appreciate the dilemmas faced by the patient related to education, employment, relationships, or substance use/abuse.

You are *not alone* because you have experienced the suffering (physical, emotional, relational, and spiritual) that occurs because mental illness is a family affair.

“Mental illness is a family experience – shared together – but suffered separately.”

Marshall, Bell & Moules, p. 197

You are *not alone* because you know the challenges that come with having a family member who is mentally ill:

- Continual nature of the stress
- Feeling a wide range of emotions (helplessness, grief, guilt, frustration, anger, and confusion to name but a few)
- Effects of stigma
- Conflict in the relationship with your family member because of the nature of the illness
- Difficulty getting information from healthcare providers

You are *not alone* because you have shared the experience of “triangles” – relationships where you are always caught in the middle – and relationships that you enter where angels fear to tread!

You are *not alone* because all of you have joined the dance; you might be wishing for a slow dance but instead you get a jive or polka! You might have expected a waltz with your partner – with two people in harmony but instead you are trying to dance and your partner is standing still.

But --- you might **feel alone!** So today is about *you*. We will share decisions and actions that you can take in your everyday life to promote your own mental health and well-being.

Today, we are engaging in mental health promotion – for you, the caregiver.

Please write your goal for today:

Personal and family strengths

Depending on where you are in the caregiver journey, you have developed personal and family strengths. Through your personal experiences, you may have learned:

- To understand the symptoms of the mental illness – know more about triggers such as too much stress.
- To develop specific strategies to help you handle difficult moments – ranging from learning about the diagnosis, to finding treatment, to managing family conflicts.
- To respond to safety – for yourself - and what to do about risks for self-harm.
- To adapt to the changing needs of your family member – how to be helpful without being intrusive.
- About boundaries; how to promote self-reliance and set clear limits and expectations.
- How to deal with various care systems – and develop alliances with healthcare providers.

Self-Care

You know that you have to take care of yourself if you want to take care of anyone else. Supporting someone who lives with a mental illness is a challenging experience and you need to find balance. Have you learned?

- To develop supportive relationships for yourself – within your own circle of family and friends, or within support groups?
- To be focused more on the present and to let go of regrets about the past; to have hope for yourself and your ill family member?
- To grieve, accept and adapt to life with mental illness?
- To protect yourself from unhelpful comments and advice-giving?

BUT – just in case you have not yet had opportunity to develop these strengths, we will explore these ideas in more detail together.

During this presentations we want to ask you some questions about your experiences as a family caregiver. We hope that you are willing to discuss your answers with another member of the audience and to share with the larger group. There is a lot of wisdom and experience in the group and this is one way to learn from each other.

1. Think about a typical day for you with respect to supporting your family member. Reflect: how have you learned to handle “difficult moments?” Discuss with a partner. If you wish, you can share an idea with the larger group.
2. What is the best thing that you have learned about taking care of yourself? Discuss with a partner. We hope that you will share your ideas with the larger group.
3. What have you learned about the illness that your family member is experiencing? Where did you learn this? What kind of information do you wish you or your family could learn about mental illness? (Audience will discuss as a group.)
4. What is your greatest hope for yourself and for your family? What does the word “recovery” mean to you? (Audience will discuss as a group.)
5. If you had one suggestion for Mental Health Promotion to assist family caregivers, what would it be? (Audience will discuss as a group.)

NOTES:

Maureen Osis is a registered nurse and a marriage & family therapist. Through her work as a nurse and a therapist, she has helped individuals and families develop stronger relationships, and to adapt to chronic illnesses and new caregiver roles. She is the co-founder and past-president of ElderWise® Inc. a company devoted to helping Canadian families find help and hope through the stages of caring for aging parents. She invites you to sign up for the free e-newsletter, ElderWise Info. www.elderwise.ca

Contact Information

Tel: 403-246-3178

E-mail: maureenosis@shaw.ca

Personal Website: www.maureenosis.com

Website: Elder Wise www.elderwise.ca

Here are “**10 Tips for Family Caregivers**” published by the National Family Caregivers Association. Review each tip and then make notes for yourself. Are you currently following the suggestion? Would you like to do more of this in the future?

Tip	Your Notes
1. Caregiving is a job and respite is your earned right. Reward yourself with respite breaks often.	
2. Watch out for signs of depression in yourself and don't delay in getting professional help when you need it.	
3. When people offer to help, accept the offer and suggest specific things they can do.	
4. Educate yourself about your loved one's condition and how to communicate effectively with doctors.	
5. There's a difference between caring and doing. Be open to technologies and ideas that promote your loved one's independence.	
6. Trust your instincts. Most of the time they'll lead you in the right direction.	
7. Caregivers often do a lot of lifting, pushing, and pulling. Be good to your back.	
8. Grieve for your losses, and then allow yourself to dream new dreams.	
9. Seek support from other caregivers. There is great strength in knowing you are not alone.	
10. Stand up for your rights as a caregiver and a citizen.	

Resources

Health Link 1-866-408-5465

Mental Health Line 1-877-303-2642

Staffed 24/7 by health professionals, the Mental Health Help Line provides: crisis intervention; information on Mental Health programs and services; and referral to other agencies where appropriate. This confidential, anonymous service is provided by Health Link Alberta and is available to all Albertans.

For senior caregivers

You Are Not Alone. A workshop for seniors caring for seniors

Available on web <http://www.maureenosis.com/Keynotes-Workshops.htm>

You are Not Alone: Self-Care and Support for Caregivers.

A conversation with those caring for someone with a mental illness

Available at www.maureenosis.com (Visit Keynotes and Workshop page.)