

Caregiving: Surviving and Thriving

By Dr. Serena Patterson and Monika Grünberg, RCC

A few months ago we were invited to give a workshop for the family care givers of elderly patients. Ever since then, we have been reflecting, reading, and listening to people who look after family members. What we are learning is that “care giving” is an extremely complicated, and varied experience. What we are certain about is that there is no single face of “the caregiver” in our society, nor is there one set of needs or one set of experiences shared by all.

Care giving is paid or unpaid, formal or informal, home-based or institutional, family-provided or other-provided. The people who receive care are disabled or able-bodied (and in-between), young or old (and in-between), pleasant or unpleasant (and in-between). Those who give care do so for so many reasons: for love, for meaning, for enjoyment, for a living wage, for interest and stimulation, for praise, for paying back debts of gratitude, for paying forward to make the world better, and on and on.

We are also learning what an ordinary part of life care is. Needing care is not some special or new problem to be solved, although our society has many problems around providing care at the moment. Everyone needs care at many points in their lives, and in many forms.

We are learning that those who give care have many skills. Some of these skills come from formal education. Some are learned through an informal education that occurs in our homes and neighborhoods--not long ago mothers, aunts and neighbors gave most girls a very long and complex training for care giving that was entirely separate from formal schooling. Other skills we teach ourselves, on the job. A husband taking care of his ailing wife, a mother taking care of a tiny baby, a daughter taking care of her mother, and a nurse in a hospital emergency room all have to find ways of handling their emotions, and of balancing their own needs with the needs of others. These caregivers have very different people to care for, and different situations to care in, for but they also have more in common than shows on the surface.

To give care means working with other care givers. These alliances can be quite difficult to set up and to maintain. For instance, a child who is “in care” of the government may have foster parents, biological parents, step parents, grandparents, a social worker, some aunts and uncles, a teacher and a set of siblings. Each of these people wants to help, and each may have particular gifts that the child needs. At the same time, it may be quite difficult for each to set aside misgivings about some of the others and build trusting alliances for the child’s sake.

Most care givers take great pride in their work, even if that work sometimes seems invisible to others. Almost all who do this work, paid or unpaid, feel that it is important and has value. But it is hard to see the value of care in a society that thinks of “independence”, not interdependence, as its primary virtue. When society doesn’t value care, it fails to create good conditions for it to thrive. Regaining the emotional energy needed when "the cup runs empty" can be a challenge in these times, when so much of political and social thinking seems bent on denying the need for, and the work of, care between people.



It has been said many times that it takes a village to raise a child. One might also say that it takes a village to get any of us through our lives, from cradle to grave. We are never free from our need for care, and we are never free from our need to care. Nor is care a private thing, behind family walls and separate from the “real world” of business.

If we are paying attention, we may see that our days are full of small acts of care. There is the person who left the shower clean and fresh before us in the morning, or who makes our lunch, or who sends us a funny thing on the internet, or who calls out to us as they take their evening walk, checking the neighborhood over one more time. Care flows along the lines of a big, invisible web of ties that can support us, challenge us, pull us down, or hold us steady. It is in this web of care that we experience our sweetest, and our stickiest, moments.

Back to our workshop planning. We are busy listening to all of the care givers that we know (and who is not one?) for clues about how to make the most of this web of care in our lives. We are certain that the skills and strengths of care givers (and of those who receive care) can be recognized, valued, and built upon to make a better society.

In our workshop, we will start with the observation that needing one another, whether we are young, old or in-between, is natural and right. We will speak of the importance of knowing, and loving, ones self. We will look for, and find, some of the expert skills and knowledge that care givers can share with one another. Together we will reflect on the life meaning and the richness that people find in the giving and receiving of care. We may even help people learn to recognize common traps of thinking that can get in the way of this richness. We will try on some new ways of thinking about and nourishing the flow of care in our lives. In response, we hope to see alliances forming, warmth and pride in work growing, burn-out averted, and people thriving despite the less-than-ideal societal conditions for care.

Counsellor team Monika Grünberg, Registered Clinical Counsellor, and Dr. Serena Patterson, Registered Psychologist, offer a workshop called “Surviving and Thriving as Caregivers”. For more information, you can contact their office at (250) 339-3269.

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