



Meeting You Right Where You're At

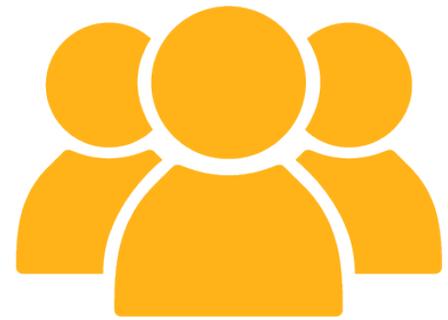
Caregiver Support in a Pandemic World

“Welcome everyone,” Linda’s voice chimes overtop the flicker of faces logging onto their Zoom call.

“I thought we would just start kind of connecting; I know that someone has some great news to start us off!”

Linda points to a square on her screen just as Zoom’s algorithm finishes sorting the participants into a rational arrangement. Five have come, with another soon to log onto Linda’s call. An oblong mirror hangs behind one the face of one, a loveseat behind another.

One is in a comfy sweater, perched up against a stack of pillows on their bed. Another, business-casual, sits behind a home office desk. Still another peers down at their tablet; one more must briefly leave to address a concern brought up by their partner.



“From the beginning, when I met Linda, she right away validated caregiving. Linda is an advocate for us.”

They are a cross-section of the community of Waterloo Region, diverse in their backgrounds, circumstances, and situations in which they are able to meet. But all are bound by a common thread of shared experience: They each bear the responsibility of caring for and supporting a loved one.

Some pour out their joys, others their frustrations. Across the next hour, there will be voices of fear, voices of triumph, voices of exasperation, voices of gratitude.

And Linda meets each of these caregivers right where they’re at.

“From the beginning, when I met Linda, she right away validated caregiving,” a group member mentions afterward. “Linda is an advocate for us.”



One group member opens up about the birth of a grandchild, but their excitement rapidly dissipates. Their mind cannot help but be consumed with the preoccupation of their parents in retirement living, inactive and accumulating mounting costs and service expenditures.

Linda nods and listens. She asks for a small clarification on their parents' living arrangements, but betrays her sharp recollection of each individual's care circumstances.

"She is a very good listener she remembers what you say from week to week, she pulls it together, she's non judgemental," one group member reflects.

The group member finishes recalling their week, confessing their anger at the way their parents' needs seem to be tearing their life asunder.

"Anger is normal. To express that is okay," Linda affirms.

"She is a very good listener, she remembers what you say from week to week, she pulls it together, she's non-judgmental."

The facilitator of Community Support Connections' Caregiver Support groups, Linda often attests that empathy is an important tool for building the emotional resiliency needed as a caregiver. Even by her mere presence, she exudes that quality, gentling nurturing it in every member of the support groups she fosters.

As one opens up to their week's experiences, others gather their thoughts to do so likewise. Some care for parents, others spouses. Some must face attending to physical needs, others mental. Some occupy liminal spaces between caregiving for an older generation and tending after a younger one. Some have had good weeks, others distressing ones. Some have many emotions to articulate – others share nothing at all, based off of their comfort level. All listen, contrast, relate, and learn, thread together by guiding from Linda, who offers both knowledge and a veteran's worth of insight to provide encouragement from.

"I know there are some times I've been on here, and I can hardly talk I'm so mad, but Linda calms me down," confesses a member. "She's got that listening ability; hearing other people's situations makes mine not feel so bad. I think it does help to share information."

"All [these] things we learn... have been helpful for me, too. It's a real gentle, practical education."

Even through the digital windows of a Zoom landscape, the atmosphere of the group is allaying and comfortable, a safe place to be vulnerable, share, and find solidarity, learning from each other's experiences and walking the path of the caregiver together.

"This is really about ensuring, as caregivers, your needs get met," Linda comments, pulling up graphics on her screen for the group to see. The cathartic act of learning through sharing is only one aspect of her support groups – Linda also walks members through practical guides to navigating the caregiving experience, from the structure of the local care network, to techniques for building emotional resiliency. Cultivating an awareness of boundaries, and negotiating the emotional balance between the self and those you care for, is the focus of this week's session.



"All [these] things we learn... have been helpful for me, too," a caregiver relates. "It's a real gentle, practical education. And so interesting!"

As Linda works through the Hierarchy of Needs, the information resonates with the caregivers present. They respond and engage, taking time to reflect on their circumstances and where they find themselves positioned.

COVID-19, the caregivers note, has exasperated many of their concerns, magnifying care needs and responsibilities while reducing the options for caregiver respite. Adapting to the pandemic reality, the shift from in-person meetings to Zoom calls has allowed Linda to continue to facilitate a place to process when so few supports remain.

"I don't even mind that it's on Zoom," a member states. "It doesn't bother me, because I can see [everyone]. I was always a person who believed in personal contact... but even just to sit here is nice, and being able to connect with people."

Linda clicks off of her shared screen, returning to the forum view of the group. "You do need to determine who are the people who are going to lift you up," she concludes. "You need a listener,

someone who is going to unconditionally do that."

"Even just to sit here is nice, and being able to connect with people."

One group member is quick to respond. "That's what this group is good for!"

Others chime in, in turn.

"It's good perspective... We are all looking into each other's lives, and we're all coming from different places that are a struggle, and nobody would know otherwise."

"I am glad Linda brought this group together, because this has been a Godsend," one gratefully explains. The others nod in collective agreement.

"We don't feel alone." 

