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Regional Palliative Care Services

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Focusing on Self-Care in Palliative Care

By Seth Gysbers, RN Palliative Care Nurse Consultant

Working as a nurse in palliative care, I often have people ask: “How can you work in such a difficult area? Don’t you find it depressing?” Working in a palliative care setting is often rewarding. I find when I sit back and reflect on my experiences I see the difference that I make, and am appreciative of the time I share with patients who are living in their last few months of life. There are also many times where working in palliative care is difficult. Many professionals working in this field or with this patient population experience conflict, failure, sadness or helplessness (Pallium, 2018). There is also a great deal of exposure to situations where people are suffering physically, psychologically and spiritually. These situations are often stressful and impact those caregivers directly and indirectly. Healthcare professionals who deal with the stress of attending

to these patients’ complex needs over a long period of time are at an increased risk of burnout and compassion fatigue (Smit, 2017). The intimate nature of palliative care with all of the individual and complex demands requires professionals to possess and develop a high degree of self-awareness as well as strategies for self-care to avoid burnout and compassion fatigue.

The concept of providing ourselves with care is sometimes difficult to accept. Education of health professionals is often focused on providing holistic care to our patients, and less on how to holistically take care of ourselves. Developing self-awareness and engaging in self-care not only promotes wellness for oneself by improving life-satisfaction and an improved sense of well-being (Smit, 2017) but can also help healthcare professionals to be more empathetic and better able to care for others (Pallium, 2018). The purpose of this article is to provide readers with some suggestions for self-care.

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Self-care according to Smit's article *Making Self-Care a Priority: Caring for the Caregiver* (2017), is about giving yourself permission to spend time reflecting on your own well being and becoming aware of signs of burnout, stress or potential boundary violations. Self-care looks different for everyone as our experiences, beliefs, values and needs are different. Self-care according to Smit (2017) requires a multifaceted approach in order to meet individual physical, emotional/cognitive, relational and spiritual needs.

Below are some self-care strategies under different domains as recommended in Smit's article (2017) or as otherwise cited. Read through the activities and think about which ones, might be helpful and enjoyable to yourself.

Physical Self-Care:

- Exercise has long been recommended for cardiovascular, and physical health benefits. Aerobic exercise 3-4 times per week for 30-40 minutes can help us not only maintain physical health but reduce anxiety and depression as well (Butot, 2018).

- Ensure you are getting adequate sleep and are consuming nutritious food.
- Simple breathing exercises, progressive relaxation techniques, yoga, massage and acupuncture when incorporated into your self-care routine can help with physical relaxation.

Emotional and Cognitive Self-Care Activities:

- Developing a ritual/system for expressing emotions is an important part of letting go of emotional baggage and giving yourself appropriate ways to express these emotions.
- Spend time listening to music, talking with a friend, taking a hot bath or cuddling with a pet.
- Spending time journaling/writing about your experiences and the emotions you experienced can help you not only express yourself but distance and eliminate feelings. Reflecting on your emotions and responses can help bring about understanding to difficult or confusing events.

Relational Self-Care:

Developing and maintaining a strong support network is important.

- Spend time debriefing with colleagues, family and friends about situations you have found to be difficult or challenging. This can help give you perspective and allow for the acknowledgement of feelings.
- Sometimes your needs may be beyond what you feel comfortable discussing with people you work with or your family; consider making use of the NHA Employee and Family Assistance Program.
- Be aware of your professional boundaries and identify warning signs that you may be crossing these boundaries (i.e. extreme emotions, sharing with a patient what you feel they should be doing, or trying to control their care).

Spiritual Self-Care

- Most people find some purpose or a sense of connectedness through religious beliefs or spirituality:

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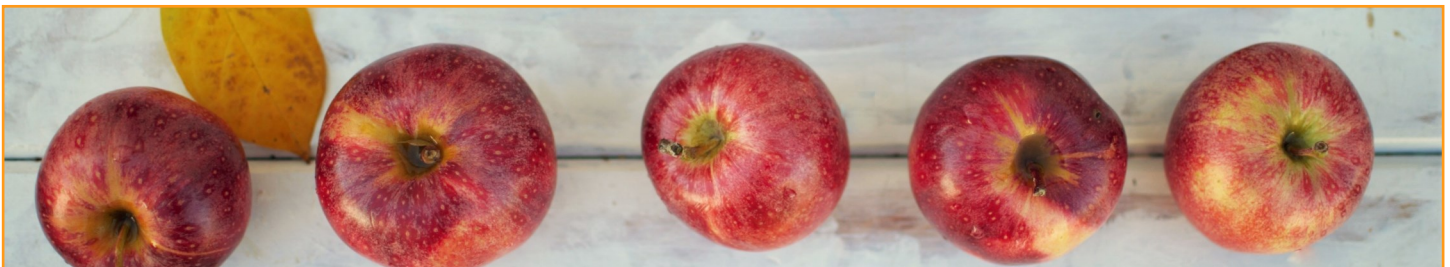


- Take time to connect with things that give you meaning/purpose in life whether this is spending time in nature, reading, praying, reflecting or meditating.

Make a commitment to your own self-care, and start with one or two activities in these domains that you feel comfortable trying to incorporate into your own self-care plan. Add in more activities as needed or as your life permits.

References

- Butot, M. adapted from Preston, J (2018). Practical Ideas for Building Resilience (*handout*). Victoria, Canada: Victoria Hospice Society.
- Pallium Canada. (2018). *LEAP Core: Being Aware Module*.
- Smit, C. (2017). Making Self Care a Priority: Caring for the Carer. *Whiteria Nursing and Health Journal*, 29-35.



Upcoming Palliative Education Opportunities

Pallium's LEAP Core - Multiple Locations

Palliative Care Consultation will be providing LEAP Core education sessions this fall.

Region	City	Dates	Facilitators
NE	Fort St John	October 31 & November 1	Annie Leong & Seth Gysbers
NI	Prince George	November 21 & 22	Jennifer Ferguson & Jenna Hemmerich
NW	TBA	TBA	TBA

Education Sessions by Skype

A team of experts in palliative care will be presenting a series of interdisciplinary webinars on palliative care. Health professionals from all care settings are invited to attend. A specific subject will be taught each month and repeated throughout the month to allow more people to participate. Webinars are recorded and provided on OurNH and the external website.

Month	Topic	Presenter
October	Difficult Conversations in Advanced Disease	Dr. Inban Reddy
November	Kath Murray (PSW) - Difficult Breathing & Fatigue	Annie Leong
December	TBA	Jenna Hemmerich

If you are interested in having your name added to our distribution list, please contact Palliative.Care.Consult.Team@northernhealth.ca