

FOR FAMILY AND FRIENDS: HELP OUT – DON'T BURN OUT!



Chronic pain has physical, psychological, familial and social ramifications.

Chronic pain affects not only the person who suffers from it; it also has an impact on family members and friends. So often, these caregivers can feel helpless. They don't know what to do to help and can experience significant distress themselves.

The daily life of family members and friends is often turned upside-down by chronic pain. It's not unusual for them to:

- Cut back on their personal, professional and social lives. For example, someone might feel compelled to give up certain activities in order to take care of the sick person, or even take time off work to go with the person to appointments or treatments.
- Change their habits, i.e. reorganize their lives and activities so they can be available to help.
- Redefine the roles and duties of family members.
- Offer support and pay special attention to the loved one who is suffering.

- Spend less time with others.
- Experience difficulty setting limits.

There are also emotional repercussions. Family and friends may feel:

- Fear of their loved one's pain and anxiety about the future
- A sense of guilt
- Discouraged by treatment results
- Frustrated, angry and irritable
- Helplessness
- A loss of control
- Sadness in face of the situation
- Increased stress

Tips for family and friends

Family and friends play a key role in maintaining the health and well-being of someone suffering from chronic pain. Their support can even contribute to the benefits of treatment. It is therefore extremely important for family and friends to take care of *themselves* as well as the person in pain. If you are such a caregiver, watch for these symptoms, which may be signs of exhaustion:


- Fatigue
- A change in sleep habits: difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep
- Difficulty concentrating
- Mood changes: a tendency to be more impatient or irritable
- Hair-trigger emotions: you cry more often
- A tendency to isolate yourself or be more withdrawn

If you are experiencing these symptoms, remember that there are a variety of things you can do to relieve your stress and distress. These same solutions can also be useful tools for preventing it:

- Learn as much as you can about chronic pain: the more you understand about it, the better you will be able to help.
- Stay in touch with the people you love: their support can be invaluable to you during difficult times.
- Talk about how you're feeling with close friends and family members, as well as with the treatment team.
- Pay attention to your own needs.
- Learn to know your own limits and how to respect them.
- Ask a health professional for assistance in understanding what's happening to you. He or she can help you find solutions.
- Join a support group for caregivers.
- Share household and family responsibilities by delegating tasks to people according to their abilities.
- Make sure your goals in helping are concrete and realistic.
- Identify potential resource people: friends, neighbours, etc.
- Ensure easy access to stress-reduction techniques, such as relaxation exercises, calming music, abdominal breathing, massage, etc.
- Enhance your ability to deal with change.
- Analyze the situation as positively as possible. Focus more on what you can still do, as opposed to what you can no longer do.

It's not always easy to find the right solution for every situation. But stay open to suggestions and don't be afraid to ask for help.

Here are some useful references :

- Association québécoise de la douleur chronique:
www.chronicpainquebec.org
- Pain Clinics affiliated with the University of Montreal: www.cliniquesdouleur.umontreal.ca 
- Canadian Pain Society:
www.canadianpainsociety.ca
- Canadian Pain Coalition:
www.canadianpaincoalition.ca

The central core of your life must remain **your life**, not your loved one's pain. Stay focused on the important things and make sure to get your share of pleasure and joy. You should be able to find satisfaction in your life, despite the difficulties.