

## Spotlight on Alzheimer's

Alzheimer's disease—the most common form of dementia that gradually erodes memory, thinking and behaviour—doesn't just impact the person with the disease. Its diagnosis can have a ripple effect that involves a much wider circle including family caregivers and, inadvertently, the organization where caregivers work. What can you do as a leader to support an employee caring for someone with Alzheimer's? A lot thinks Barb Veder, Shepell-fgi's Clinical Director of Regional Clinical Services. Read on to discover how you can help.

### What are the biggest challenges for a worker caring for someone with Alzheimer's?

There are many challenges, both emotionally and physically. But in the context of work, it's really about having enough **time and flexibility** in one's working hours to help with daily care and to respond to emergencies if and when they arise.

An employee caring for someone with Alzheimer's may also have to **arrange care** and deal with the medical, financial and legal issues of their loved one. On top of this, employees may be **taking care of other family members like younger children**. As many are delaying having children until later in life, we're seeing more and more "sandwich generation" adults in the workplace—those caring for kids and aging parents at the same time, including loved ones with Alzheimer's. This constant juggling act can really deplete an employee's time and energy. There's simply too much to do and not enough time in a day to get it all done.

### Can their role as caregiver impact their work?

Absolutely. While most people do their best to separate their work and home lives, they often spill over into one another. An employee caring for someone with Alzheimer's may have trouble concentrating on work because they're worried their loved one may be in harm's way while they're on the job (especially if they don't have 24/7 care). For example, they may fear their loved one will wander off, forget to eat, leave the stove on, etc.

They may also feel overwhelmed and overburdened with incidences that can happen at any time. Even if the person is there during an emergency, the time and effort spent on dealing with it can leave them physically and emotionally exhausted.

### What can a manager do to support an employee caring for someone with Alzheimer's?

I think showing empathy is really important. After all, you never know when you might be in the same situation. **Try to be as flexible as possible** so the employee can take the time when needed for care giving without worrying their job is in jeopardy. This might also mean allowing the employee to work from home occasionally or offering the option of working a compressed, shorter work week.

You should also work together to **create an "emergency plan"** should an issue come up. For example, store project files on a shared drive (or ensure you get a copy of files) so if the employee is away, someone else on the team can fill in without disruption.

Also, I think it's wise to refer the employee to your **organization's Employee Assistance Program (EAP)**. Not only can they get support from a counsellor, but EAP also offers resources and information on Alzheimer's and related support groups, home care, associations as well as long-term care facilities. It's a great resource that costs the employee nothing to access.

Finally, **review government resources such as Compassionate Care Benefits** or contact your Human Resources (HR) department to investigate care benefits your organization offers.

### What are the consequences of an unsupportive work environment?

There are many, and they don't just apply to caregivers—though the issues may be magnified for this group. Caregiver employees could become stressed, potentially resulting in **poorer work performance, higher absenteeism or ultimately stress/disability leave**. The employee's ongoing stresses may also **impact members of their team** and lead to low morale within the department. Finally, if a worker doesn't feel supported, they may end up **resigning or retiring early** because they can't balance work and their care giving duties.

### SPOT THE SIGNS: Caregiver burnout

Caring for a loved one with Alzheimer's isn't easy—especially while trying to hold down a job. If your employee is displaying or has expressed that they are experiencing any of these symptoms, connect them with the organization's Employee Assistance Program for support and resources.

- Trouble sleeping or changes in sleep patterns;
- Feeling irritable or snapping at others;
- Socially withdrawing or a disinterest in activities the employee used to be enthusiastic about;
- Substandard work performance or not completing tasks at all;
- Emotional outbursts at work; tears, anger, defensiveness or over-sensitivity to feedback or everyday workplace situations;
- Gain or loss of weight, gain or loss in appetite;
- Depression—feeling blue and/or hopeless;
- Physical and/or emotional exhaustion;
- Frequent absence because of illness; headaches, colds, flu, etc.;
- Discussion of self-harm or harming others; including loved one with Alzheimer's.

### QUICK TIPS: Create a supportive work environment

What you can **do now** to create a workplace that welcomes family caregivers and encourages a healthier more balanced environment for all.

- Explore flexible work schedule options that suit both the employee and the organization;
- Engage employees and promote wellness by offering on-site health and wellness seminars or workshops. Topics offered by your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) include: Being in the Sandwich Generation, Caring for an Elderly Parent, and Finding Home Care and Community Resources;
- Encourage employees to build social networks at the workplace so they can share experiences and, in sharing, overcome stress;
- Support and encourage employees to take their allotted vacation time;
- Encourage employees to establish boundaries between their work lives and home lives. Model this behaviour yourself as a leader;
- Refer employees to national and local Alzheimer's related resources such as the Alzheimer Society.

### Alzheimer's Alert (Canada):

- In 2010 Canadian caregivers spent 259 million hours looking after a family member with dementia. By 2038, that number is expected to reach 756 million hours.
- Dementia's impact on family caregivers can be both psychological and physical: 15-32 per cent of caregivers have depression while it's believed up to 75 per cent will develop a psychological illness.
- \$872 billion: the estimated cumulative economic burden of dementia by 2038 on Canada.
- A study of caregivers who work found 70 % experienced challenges dealing with their dual roles (i.e. caregiver and employee).
- The burden of caregiving often spills into the workplace reducing productivity by 18.5 % and increasing an employee's chances of leaving the organization.