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THE IMPORTANCE OF CREATIVE EXPRESSION DURING CAREGIVING

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Article:

“An illness cannot exist only in an individual, its repercussions and impacts are felt by the community. This community includes caregivers, family, friends, colleagues and, loved ones,” says Devika Mehta Kadam, a dance movement psychotherapist and the co-founder of Synchrony. Devika has worked with both caregivers and patients diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease, dementia, chronic medical illnesses and more. Through this article, I hope to share Devika’s expertise in creative expression and mental wellbeing.

So, what is Creative Expression? Caregiver Saathi has conducted seminal research to identify and establish elements of wellbeing. Out of [the 8 elements of wellbeing](#), creative expression is one that is often neglected by many and not given much importance.

Caregiver Saathi defines it as the ability for an individual to express herself/himself better, in different ways including cooking, dressing up or keeping the house in a particular way. It is the ability to express your innermost feelings and give expression to your thoughts distinctively but not necessarily limited to traditional performing arts like painting/drawing, drama, music, etc.

Unlike most other roles that an individual plays in their life, caregiving is one that is impossible to anticipate and prepare for. More often than not, caregiving is an unexpected challenge that comes your way. Caregivers are not only unfamiliar with this newfound role but also are uncertain about what to expect. While they try to navigate through the challenging process of

caregiving, it is a given that they find themselves in high-level stressful situations. These conditions have an adverse impact on their own health and wellbeing. Even though expressing yourself creatively is one of the simplest and most effective ways to cope with stress, caregivers find themselves unable to practice this. As a caregiver, you may find yourself juggling between various tasks and activities. In times like these, it might seem close to impossible to take time out for yourself and engage in any form of creative expression. However, this means that you are constantly de-prioritising yourself and this can only lead to negative outcomes in the long run.

“The word ‘caregiving’ connotes an expectation to constantly give to your care receiver. In this process, the caregivers almost forget to ‘give’ something to themselves. Caregivers don’t take time out for themselves and don’t ask for space or a break from their caregiving responsibilities”, Furthermore, Devika adds that more often than not, “this happens because taking time out for oneself does not match their own internal understanding of what a responsible caregiver’s profile would look like.”

Why is Creative Expression Important?

Since caregiving is mostly about giving to another individual, creative arts or creative expression is so essential as it allows you to have your own space and empty your mind in the process of caregiving.

“It is very important for us to redefine the word ‘create’ or what ‘creating something’ means”. Devika promotes the concept of focusing on the act of creation, instead of the end product. She believes that there is a very strong judgement on how beautiful or good your outcome of creation is meant to be. For instance, we often give more importance to the final artwork over the creation of that artwork. It shouldn’t matter how good or bad the outcome is as long as you enjoy the process of creating it.

She further divulges how creative expression is the means through which one can recharge their batteries, recoup their mental resources, ground themselves and feel in control of themselves. This not only ensures one to be the best possible version of themselves but also enables them to offer more to the care receiver.

Dance Movement Therapy is based on the idea that your mental health and status affects how you hold these different emotions which have a subsequent impact on patterns in your body. If you can change these patterns in your body, it can immensely help with your mental health. Similarly, giving an outlet for your body to express itself either verbally or non-verbally relieves stress and increases one’s overall wellbeing.

Devika believes that while dancing, singing, painting are great ways of creatively expressing yourself – creative expression is not limited to just that. It could be something as simple as consciously taking deep breaths and creating space in your body, your lungs and your mind. Feel the freedom to pick your choice of expression, it could be cooking, reading, solving a crossword puzzle, grooving to music, or absolutely anything else- as long as you are conscious

of the experience, can feel your presence in the here and now and are establishing a space where you can truly be yourself and truly feel every emotion.

How can one practice creative expression?

Devika, stresses on the fact that creative expression, just like self-care is a practice. It is a ritual that needs to be done regularly. You cannot do it once a month and feel like you have released all your stress. To maintain this element of wellbeing, one needs to really engage in this process daily – be it only 10 mins or over an hour, it has to be done. In our culture, self-care is equated to selfishness and this can be a major barrier that comes in the way of creatively expressing yourself. But it is important to remember, that you can only help another individual when you yourself are feeling physically and emotionally sound. Creative expression gives you the opportunity for self-exploration where you can introspect and reflect better on your needs as well as your care receiver's.

According to Devika, there are key ways in which you can effectively express yourself through a creative channel

1. You do not have to force yourself into a routine. You do not have to set a fixed time for your creative expression. On some days it could be in the morning before you start your day, some days in the middle or at the end. Just like you take a “power nap” when you feel exhausted, normalise the practice of a “power creative expression routine”, a routine that very quickly that allows you to refuel and rejuvenate yourself any time of the day
2. Consistency is key. Even though initially it might seem like an added chore to your already busy schedule, soon your body will know when it needs a boost of energy or creative outlet for expression. This can only happen if you practice expressing yourself through whichever medium daily and regularly.
3. Make it a sensorial experience. It is important to immerse yourself and be present when you are practising creative expression and the best way to achieve this is by being aware. For instance, if your choice of creative expression is cooking or painting, ask yourself what are you feeling in your hands? What are you smelling? What are you hearing? By focusing on the sensorial aspect, you are able to steer clear of thoughts that are otherwise constantly clouding your mind.

As caregivers, it is important to remember that you can only do justice to this role if you actively take care of yourself and your well-being. It is essential to prioritise your needs, your mental and physical health by taking time out for yourself and practising creative expression. Not taking care of yourself and partaking in acts of creative expression can have really detrimental impacts on one's overall wellbeing.

About the Author



Tanishka Pillai is a student at The University of Hong Kong and is pursuing a double major in psychology and counselling. She's also founded 'Quote Unquote', a platform that facilitates a healthy exchange of ideas and perspectives amongst a group of like-minded individuals. Tanishka advocates for gender equality and hopes to dismantle the stigma associated with mental health through her work in the field of counselling psychology in the future.

About Devika M. Kadam



Devika Mehta Kadam is Dance Movement Psychotherapist and holds Master's in Clinical Psychology. She is the Co- Founder of Synchrony and Course Director of the P.G. Diploma Program in Expressive Arts Therapy at St. Xavier's College Mumbai. She has 10 years of experience of working with individuals and families from the client as well as caregiver perspective across varied age groups.