

Why Do I Feel the Way I Do?



**Del Mar Caregiver
Resource Center**

Supporting Caregivers through their Journey

Caring for a person with a neurological condition is a journey equally rewarding and complicated. This paper addresses the emotional aspects of caregiving. The spectrum of feelings is vast. Moments of joy, happiness and contentment can be replaced with fear, doubt and anger. At times caregivers may find themselves riding a roller-coaster of mixed feelings.

What are Feelings?

Feelings are expressions of who we are as humans. They reflect our response to the world we live in. Family caregivers of persons with neurological conditions shoulder more responsibilities than other caregivers. (National Alliance for Caregiving, 2017). A day in the life of a caregiver is like putting in a 36-Hour Day. Always on call, ready and prepared, regardless of "How I 'am feeling."

Caregiving is a fulltime job and is more than it seems. Family caregivers are responsible for,

- Cooking, cleaning, running errands
- Assisting with bathing, dressing and grooming
- Managing household finances
- Supervising for safety and protection
- Scheduling health care appointments
- Honoring their loved one's preferences

Unique challenges come with this job description. Family caregiver are asked to,

- Live by someone else's schedule.
- Understand thoughts & expressions that do not make sense from their loved one.
- Manage difficult behaviors caused by impaired brain functioning.

It is easy to see how the world of a family caregiver can result in having no time for themselves. It is within this context we understand the emotional experience of caregiving.

Guilt Grief Fear Anger Frustration Joy Gratitude Happy Love

Putting Feelings into Perspective

- Feelings make us human
- Feelings are expressions
- Feelings are necessary for our survival

Feelings are not to judge or ignore. With this thought in mind it is important to make a distinction between feelings and behaviors. Feelings are natural and expected expressions in response to environmental triggers. The behaviors that can result from a feeling state fall into positive and negative actions. To feel angry is acceptable but to act on that feeling in a way that harms others is not acceptable.

Family caregivers can find themselves with cause for negative feelings,

"My wife no longer recognized me. I have lost the person I know."

"My life is not my own any longer."

"My life goals and dreams have been put on hold."

"This isn't fair, I feel cheated."

"This feels like I am being punished."

"My siblings do not understand or believe me."

"I worry I may have to quit my job to care for my mom."

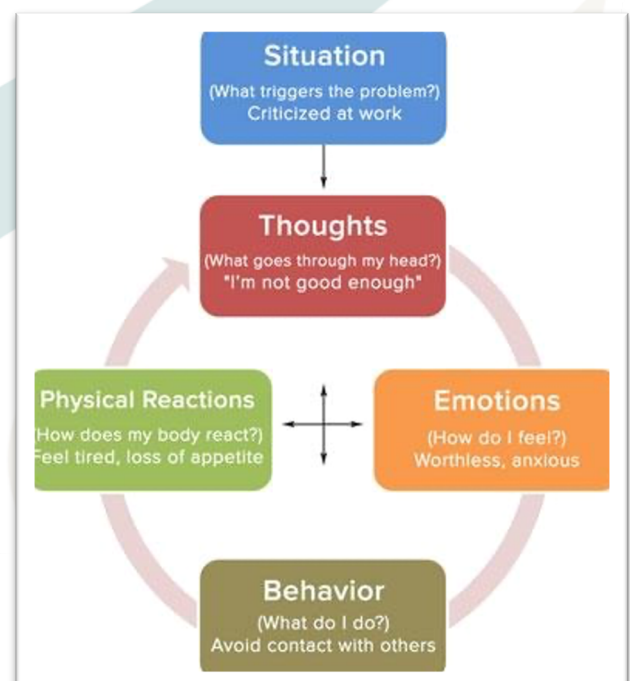
"Family and friends have stopped visiting."

Mechanics of Emotion

Cognitive Psychology teaches us that feelings result from thoughts and interpretations to life situations and events. In turn, behavior stems from feelings. The diagram below illustrates this cycle.

Having a basic understanding of the mechanics of emotions helps explain how we can find ourselves in trouble and how to get out of it. Unmanaged, negative emotions can interfere with daily living and result in patterns of irrational thinking called **Cognitive Distortions**. Cognitive or cognition, refers to thinking (thoughts). Common cognitive distortion includes,

- **Splitting** - Interpreting things as either good or bad with no in-between.
- **Catastrophizing** - Reacting to situations as more problematic than they are.



- **Should Statements** - Placing unreasonable expectations upon oneself.
- **Mind Reading** - Expecting that others should know what you think, believe, or how you feel without explanation.

Whether in a caregiving role or not, life presents a continuous supply of events that test our capacity to adjust and cope. **Coping Mechanisms** referred to in psychology are cognitive patterns for responding to life stressors. Coping mechanisms serve a purpose and can be beneficial but can also do more harm than good, for example,

- **Displacement** - Taking out your feelings on a person or thing that poses less of a risk.
- **Projection** - Attributing one's own unacceptable thoughts, feelings and behaviors to another.
- **Suppression** - Choosing to not acknowledge a conscious thought, feeling or action even though we are aware of it.
- **Repression** - Unconsciously forgetting or blocking some unpleasant thoughts, feelings and impulses.
- **Denial** - refusing to accept the truth or reality of a fact or experience.

When patterns of coping evolve into extremes, problems are difficult to resolve and outside assistance from someone you trust and/or a professional is recommended. Breaking negative cycles of thinking requires a conscious effort to change the narrative. Learning how to change the narrative takes practice and consistency of effort.

A common practice in Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy is the use of **Thought Logs**. Keeping a daily log of events and responses to them helps to identify patterns of cognitive distortions and negative coping mechanisms. Identifying these patterns enables us to change the narrative – practice “reframing” events.

The following illustrates how a Thought Log is applied,

- Select a time-period to record thoughts to events in your life.
- Each day write down an event, issue or situation that occurred and code it as (-) negative or (+) positive.
- For each entry write down the thoughts you had during and immediately after the event.
- Next identify the feeling(s) your thoughts triggered.
- Then, reflect and refute the negative thought asking yourself how else can this event be viewed?

As you continue to work on your thought log, begin looking for patterns. Are you experiencing more negative than positive responses to events in your life? Are there mind-traps at work? What may be influencing the mind-traps? Are there reasonable alternatives for thinking differently about a situation?

Caring Strong

In order to be an emotionally strong and confident caregiving requires taking time for yourself. Easier said than done, but necessary. Self-Care is not self-indulgent; it is about self-preservation. Caregiving is not a sprint but a marathon. Something must give, or serious consequences could

arise. What would occur if you were to become ill? How might juggling responsibilities of home and work improve with a break now and then. Taking care of yourself is not about taking extra time, there is no extra time, there will never be extra time and it will never be the right time. The process for getting to a place of self-care requires a reframe of how you think about yourself, your worth, and what you deserve.

Self-Care Reframe

Acceptance: My loved one has a disabling medical condition with no cure.

Meaning: I value being a caring and compassionate person.

Improvise: I trust myself.

Realistic: I am not perfect, I make mistakes, but I am genuine and sincere.

How you think about yourself, your worth and what you deserve will help answer, *“Why do I feel the way I do?”*

For information about caregiver services, call:
Del Mar Caregiver Resource Center | 1-800-624-8304
Or visit: www.delmarcaregiver.org

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