

Caregiver Coaching

Through Caregiver Coaching, we point out their strengths as caregivers and provide emotional support. This approach empowers caregivers and decreases stress because it improves their confidence and sense of competence.

Elements of caregiver coaching include:

- Developing an alliance through empathy and understanding
- Pointing out caregiver strengths and skills
- Focusing on caregiver feelings
- Normalizing changes and reframing behavior in terms of the disease
- Developing concrete strategies
- Encouraging and providing follow up

Empathy and Understanding

Empathy and understanding are basic to any kind of supportive counseling. We need to make statements that summarize what a caregiver has said in a tone that conveys our understanding and appreciation of their experience.

We can not make assumptions. If we respond by saying “That must be overwhelming.” when a husband says he has been caring for his wife alone, he may become defensive and say “It’s not overwhelming, it’s my job.”

Identifying Caregiver Strengths and Skills

Most caregivers do not recognize all the positive things they are doing for their loved ones. It’s our job to identify these for them. We can help make caregivers aware of their own strengths and skills by making statements like, “You do an amazing job getting your husband up, dressed, and to the program three times a week.” or “You are very good at distracting your mother when she gets upset.”

Focus on Caregiver Feelings

In most interactions, caregivers are focused on the patient. After we have addressed their concerns about a loved one, we need to change the focus. Asking “How are you doing with all of this?” or “What do you find most difficult to deal with?” are simple questions that encourage caregivers to express how they are feeling.

Normalize Changes and Reframe Behaviors in terms of the disease

Understandably, caregivers are often baffled by the changes in a loved one with dementia.

Education regarding areas of the brain and their connection to abilities and skills is important and is often a revelation to the caregiver.

Simple explanations work best. For example, “Alzheimer’s disease first damages the area of the brain that handles short-term memory, so your father may remember details from his childhood, but not recall what he had for breakfast, or even if he had breakfast.

Changes in personality are another challenge. If there is a radical change, it is easy for families to identify it as being caused by the disease. However, when lifelong traits are exaggerated it is more difficult. Families often assume that this behavior is deliberate or that the person is being unreasonable.

Developing Concrete Strategies

Caregivers need concrete help as much as they need support and education. We can help them develop strategies for dealing with difficult behaviors and encourage them to develop strategies of their own. In this way, we enable caregivers to be the problem solvers. When we do this, we acknowledge the importance of their role and their expert knowledge of the person, and this increases their ability to cope.

Encouraging and Providing Follow up

We all know that management techniques are not successful in every case. We never want the caregiver to have the impression that things didn’t go well because they did something wrong. It’s important to encourage the caregiver to let us know if a particular intervention doesn’t work, so that we can discuss other approaches with them.

This is also true when we refer caregivers to services. We want them to have realistic expectations. We need to coach them as to how to negotiate the system. For example, we should let them know if they can expect to be kept on hold for a long time or if a particular program needs extensive financial records. Then, we need to continually check in to see how they are doing with these referrals and if they were actually helpful.

Caregiver Coaching is an open dialogue between professionals and families. It is flexible enough to meet their changing needs and it enables us to support caregivers throughout the duration of their journey.

For more information, call the COPSA Alzheimer’s Helpline at (800) 424-2494

Comprehensive Services on Aging (COPSA) Institute for Alzheimer’s Disease and Related Disorders, University Behavioral Healthcare (UBHC) – University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey (UMDNJ)