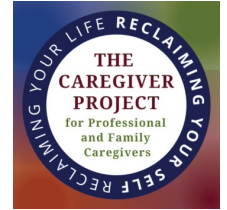




The Caregiver Project: Illuminating and Easing the Human Dimensions of Caregiving Through Facilitated Writing Workshops



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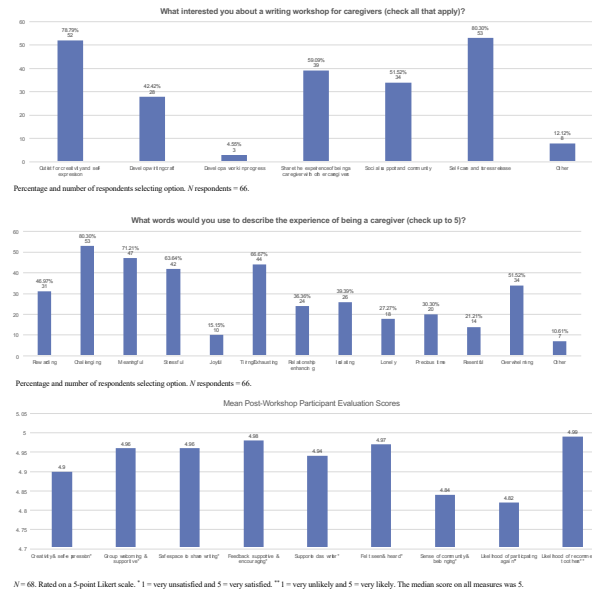
INTRODUCTION

- Approximately 25% of Canadians and Americans provide care to a family member or friend with a chronic physical or mental health condition, disability, or age-related decline in functioning.[1, 2] Feeling tired, depressed, worried or anxious, overwhelmed, isolated, burnt out, and/or being sleep deprived are widely reported. [1-3]
- There are over 1.5 million healthcare workers in Canada [4] and 14.7 million in the US [5]. The Surgeon General of the United States issued an advisory on burnout among health professionals in May of 2022.[6]
- As a social justice issue, caregivers face numerous ethical, economic, and psychosocial challenges.
- Caregivers are disproportionately female [1, 7], and the burden is greater for individuals from marginalized populations who are already facing other systemic barriers.
- The isolated nature of caregiving may limit access to social support, connection, and validation of their experiences. [8]

METHODS

- A committee of 9 AWA facilitators designed creative writing workshops for personal and professional caregivers
- 13 Zoom workshops (2 hours in duration) were offered between March and June 2023
- The workshops utilized the AWA method, which incorporates generative and expressive writing prompts, and the opportunity to share writing and receive feedback in a facilitated group setting
- Data come from voluntary pre-and post-workshop evaluations (N = 66 and 68), respectively
- 73% of participants heard about the workshops through AWA communications, while word-of-mouth, community agencies, social media, and other accounted for 23%, 11%, 5%, and 6%, respectively (could select more than one category)
- 2/3 of participants were over the age of 55, 90% were female, and 84% were personal caregivers

RESULTS



Analysis of qualitative responses identified themes related to feelings of belonging and community, validation of experiences, the opportunity to process difficult emotions, and stress release. No negative impacts were disclosed. Representative participant quotes include:

- It was illuminating and so rewarding to have the chance to explore my own experience as a caregiver, share that and receive feedback on my writing.*
- The best part of the workshop was listening to everyone's stories, the breathtaking honesty. I felt I was part of a community of care with all the breadth of experience that includes.*
- The validation and empowerment from the others in the room was incredible. I wrote things that I didn't always feel super confident about, but they made me see the strengths in it.*
- Having the chance to immerse myself in writing for 2 hours was a wonderful respite.*

DISCUSSION

- AWA workshops offer caregivers a unique avenue to explore the complex dimensions of caregiving, reclaim their voices, have their caregiving experiences validated, and give and receive social support from compassionate peers.
- Respondents noted post-workshop benefits stemming from taking time for self-care, having their experiences and writing affirmed, and receiving social support.
- While preliminary, our findings are consistent with previous studies that investigated the value of writing about emotional experiences as a therapeutic process [ref Pennebaker].
- Features of our approach include :
 - AWA writing prompts are optional and open to interpretation, allowing participants to choose the direction of their writing and avoid triggering topics;
 - Writing is shared with peers, creating a sense of community and connection;
 - Participants give and receive positive feedback that affirms both their writing and their experiences;
 - Workshops are directed by a facilitator with trauma-informed training.
- Incorporating caregiver perspectives and voices into the discourse can inform the development of caregiver-centered practices and contribute to reducing health disparities.
- Future directions for research include direct comparison of Pennebaker's method vs. the AWA method using randomly assigned groups and a wider range of outcome measures, such as stress, physical and mental health, and social support.

REFERENCES & RESOURCES

