Culminating Assignment

Spanish Language Caregiver Support Group Facilitator

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**Caregiver and Support Group Definition**

**Caregiver:** a person who gives help and protection to someone (such as a child, an old person, or someone who is sick (Merriam-Webster.com).

**Support Group:** a group of individuals who have similar experiences and concerns and who meet to provide emotional help, advice, and encouragement for one another (Merriam-Webster.com).

# The Need for a Spanish Caregiver Support Group in Snohomish County

My interest in Spanish language services for caregivers and care receivers comes from personal experience. My godmother, Guadalupe suffers from vascular dementia and Alzheimer's disease, at the time she was diagnosed we did not know there were any services available for people with dementia or their families. Through Guadalupe's neurologist, we learned about the Alzheimer's Association and the support services they offer such as home safety assessments. There is a 24-hour-helpline to answer questions about behaviors or resources in the caller's area, a guide to financial and legal planning for those in the early stages of dementia among many other services. However, the only services in Spanish were available in King County. Guadalupe and her children possess limited English language proficiency and for them driving to Seattle for services is not practical.

In my junior year in the Human Services Program, I became an intern at the Alzheimer's Association. I was trained as a care consultant to recognize signs and symptoms of dementia, evaluate safety risks in a home and intervene in crisis situations. It was during that internship when I thought about becoming a support group facilitator, and I will explain why caregivers need to attend support groups and my journey as I trained to become a support group facilitator.

# Caregivers and Stress

In the Latino culture, family members take care of their own. Many elders came to the U.S. to help their children as full-time caregivers to their grandchildren. Some elders suffered strokes that left them with vascular dementia while others developed Alzheimer's disease or other types of dementia. Many elders are now under the care of their sons or daughters, and this dynamic puts a lot of responsibility on the caregiver. Caregivers feel overwhelmed because they take care of children, pay the bills, run a household and care for a person with cognitive impairment. Too much stress can have harmful effects on the health; here are some signs of caregiver stress as listed by the Alzheimer's Association:

1**. Denial** The caregiver wants to believe that the person with the disease will get better.

**2. Anger** at the person with dementia. Anger towards the people who cannot understand. Anger that there is no cure.

**3. Social Withdrawal,** The person does not find pleasure in activities he or she used to enjoy.

**4. Anxiety about the future** thoughts about what will happen when the person with the disease develops more needs that can be met at home.

**5. Depression is** affecting daily life and the ability to cope.

**6. Exhaustion** that makes everyday tasks difficult to complete.

**7. Sleeplessness or unrestful sleep** caused by an endless list of concerns.

**8. Irritability**  Moodiness that triggers negative reactions.

**9. Lack of Concentration** Makes it difficult to perform familiar tasks.

**10. Health Declines** symptoms that take a mental and physical toll.

Stress can result in many different ailments including but not limited to, acid reflux, headaches, pain, increased risk of heart disease, anxiety, and depression.

Some strategies for dealing with caregiver stress from *The Caregiver Helpbook* include:

**1. Researching Available Resources**  Adult daycare facilities, respite care, visiting nurses and meal delivery are some of the resources anyone can access.

**2. Get Help** Seek support from friends and family or reach out for professional help within the community, you so not have to do this alone. Support groups provide emotional and social support in a safe and confidential environment.

**3. Use Relaxation Techniques** Meditation, Tai Chi, breathing exercises and progressive muscle relaxation are among the proven techniques for stress relief.

**4. Keep Moving** Physical exercise can reduce stress and improve well-being.

**5. Make Time for Yourself**  Your well-being is important and keeping social connections helps you achieve that. Make time to meet with friends or family members or to enjoy an activity you enjoy.

**6. Educate Yourself** Learning about the particular disease affecting the person you care for will help you be prepared to make decisions in the future or cope with behaviors and complications that might occur.

**7. Take Care of Yourself** Visit your healthcare professional, consume nutritious foods, relax, get plenty of rest and remember that your health is extremely important (pp.25-32).

It is evident that caregiver stress is a real threat and a public health concern. Due to the physical and emotional toll of caregiving, Alzheimer's and dementia caregivers had $9.7 billion in additional health care costs of their own in 2014 (alz.org). I believe the effects of stress are the same no matter the caregiver nationality, and since Spanish is my first language, I want to provide a much-needed service in Snohomish County.

## Becoming a Support Group Facilitator

The facilitator training provided by the Alzheimer's Association was a 10 hour program. I got an overview of Alzheimer's and dementia, the role of the facilitator was explained along with the procedures and basics of group facilitation. A comprehensive binder with instructions and resources was provided to all participants.

# Purpose of a Support Group

A support group offers an opportunity for caregivers and family members to interact with others under similar circumstances and develop a mutual support system. When members share experiences and coping mechanisms, they are helping others maintain their health and well-being while preserving their own emotional health (National Institute on Aging).

People can share feelings and experiences in a safe, confidential environment. Feelings of frustration, anger, guilt and anxiety can be shared with the group, and this removes the sense of isolation that many caregivers experience. Family members can develop realistic expectations of themselves and their cognitively impaired loved one, by doing this they can also understand and anticipate changes and the impact the disease will have on family dynamics. Support groups also provide a social connection, contributing to emotional health. The groups also help families advocate on behalf of residents in facilities or at doctor's appointments.

# Facilitator Role

As a volunteer facilitator working with the Alzheimer's Association, I am required to sign an agreement and provide a current background check. The agreement formalizes expectations and responsibilities of the Alzheimer's Association, chapter and each support group facilitator.

A facilitator's personal ideas, experiences, beliefs or needs are never a part of the support group dynamic. The facilitator is the person that helps the group process happen.

A good facilitator is:

* **Emotionally present and a good listener** Must be in tune with the group's feelings, body language, and words.
* **An excellent communicator, able to summarize and communicate** ideas and feelings and is expected to encourage others to do the same.
* **Genuine and non-judgmental** shows true feelings and thoughts and tries to understand other people's experiences.
* **Encouraging and compassionate** boosting people up without pressuring them and shows through words and body language that he/ she understands and cares about the participant's feelings.
* **Understanding of the values and culture** of the group participants.
* **Willing to guide the conversation** and willing to allow members learn from each other.
* **Capable of refocusing the group** in a gentle and polite manner.
* **Able to create a safe and confidential atmosphere** letting everyone know that what is shared will remain confidential at each meeting.

## Duties and Procedures

Some of the functions and responsibilities include:

* **Pre-screening new members**
* **Set-up meeting room**
* **Arrange to have additional Association materials available**
* **Set expectations for the meeting with group members present**
* **Be knowledgeable about resources and possible referrals**
* **Set the tone for the meeting through laughter, openness, and empathy**
* **Assessing a group attendee requiring more help**
* **Help build bridges between people**
* **Develop an emergency or weather contingency program**
* **Complete Association paperwork as soon as the meeting is over**

I was instructed on the types of formats a support group can take:

### Extended Turns Where time is divided evenly amongst participants willing to share thoughts and concerns.

**Discussion** Checking-in with participants and have them summarize issues and events since the last meeting, then discussing issues as a group.

**Educational speaker/Presentation** Asking participants about topics of interest and inviting speakers to generate discussion

**Open sharing** people share their concerns and experiences with the group whenever they feel comfortable.

As a facilitator, I am expected to abide by certain guidelines such as showing respect first, acknowledging, and honoring people and families' diverse dynamics. I will also avoid criticism or put downs, whether from me or between group members, we shall focus on the positive and encourage it. Allow disagreements that do not turn into arguments or conflict remind the group of the goal of the group, which is support. The number one responsibility towards group members shall be confidentiality.

I learned about the different ways to open discussion, for example, through questions like "What do you think about this situation?" or summarizing ideas left from a past meeting. There are also questions that broaden discussion, such as "Having heard from some participants, would others who have not spoken share any ideas?." Individual questions can help the group move along "Given the time, should we move onto another person's concern?"

The instructors stressed the importance of being aware of challenging personalities and situations. Some examples include; group members who dominate the conversation and the need to let them briefly vent. I can express that there might not be a lot of time to discuss their issue at length but that it can be brought up another time. There may be participants who seem to know it all. In this case, we can listen to their opinions and try to include other people's point of view or reflect on what was said but emphasize that people and situations can be different. Managing interactions effectively is the key to a successful support group that fulfills the goal of helping its members.

Support groups develop and go through stages. The exploratory stage is one of uncertainty for all, perhaps stemming from past experiences, it is my job to making them feel welcome and comfortable. The second stage is the "honeymoon stage" participants share, but not at a deep level. The third stage is storming. Members feel more comfortable and decide to express dislike for other members or create conflict, this could be the most difficult time for the facilitator as he or she needs to regain control of the group. The fourth stage is a true community, at this point the group has bonded, sharing occurs on a deep level and people trust each other. Recognizing each stage and guiding members through each of them is the goal I want to reach. I am not alone in this, my instructors from the Association are a phone call away and I can count on an experienced facilitator as my mentor.

Becoming a facilitator is an honor and a great responsibility. This experience will help me connect directly with clients and practice many of the skills acquired throughout the Human Services Program such as; healthy boundaries, conflict resolution, group leadership, paraphrasing and summarizing among others. I want this as well to be helpful for the participants, making them feel valued and providing a forum where they can safely debrief and learn from their peers. I am looking forward to doing this for many years to come.

#### References

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