

## Cancer Caregivers' Resilience and Their Mental Health: A Literature Review

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### ABSTRACT

Cancer is among the most serious and life-threatening diseases of the present era, posing substantial challenges not only for patients but also for those who care for them. This review paper aims to explore the impact of resilience among caregivers of cancer patients on their mental health, with particular emphasis on key factors such as caregiver burden, depression, anxiety, fear, and quality of life. The review synthesizes major research studies published between 2015 and 2025 in different databases such as Google Scholar, PubMed, PsycINFO, CINAHL, and Web of Science. This review encompasses studies examining the mental health of cancer caregivers, including aspects such as caregiver burden, depression, anxiety, quality of life, and resilience. Numerous studies have shown that caregivers who possess positive qualities, such as resilience, are better able to protect their health while also contributing more effectively to the well-being of patients. Such caregivers are more capable of managing caregiving responsibilities and demands successfully. Evidence further suggests that higher levels of resilience among caregivers are associated with improved quality of life and reduced caregiver burden. This narrative review offers a valuable framework and guidance for future research focused on the health and well-being of cancer caregivers.

**Keywords:** *Burden, Cancer caregivers, Mental health, Resilience*

Cancer is one of the most significant and rapidly growing public health challenges worldwide. Cancer is not a single disease but a group of diseases, the main characteristic of which is the uncontrolled growth and spread of abnormal cells. It is one of the leading causes of death globally, affecting millions of people each year. According to the American Cancer Society (2025), estimated data, in the year 2025, approximately 2,041,910 new cancer cases are expected in the United States, with an estimated about 5,600 cases occurring per day. In addition, around 618,120 cancer-related deaths are projected. In 2025, the most common cancers among men in the United States are prostate, lung, and colorectal cancer, while among women, breast, lung, and colorectal cancer are the most common. Over the past few decades, cancer has also emerged as a major public health problem in India. In 2025, there has been an increase in the incidence of cancer and cancer-related deaths in India. Common risk factors include tobacco use, unhealthy diet,

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physical inactivity, infections, and genetic factors (National Cancer Registry Programme, 2020).

### ***Cancer Caregivers***

The term “caregiver” encompasses a wide range of experiences and responsibilities. Caregiving may involve a caregiver providing care to a loved one in their own home, in the care recipient’s home, or in an institutional setting. It may include attending to an individual’s physical health and emotional well-being. Such care may be provided over a long period for a person with a chronic illness or physical disability, or it may be temporary and intermittent, as in the case of caring for someone with an acute illness or during an acute phase of a chronic illness.

Cancer affects not only patients but also their caregivers, who play a crucial role in the process of treatment and recovery. Caregivers, who are often family members, provide physical care, emotional support, assistance with daily activities, and help in medical decision-making. Their role is extremely important in ensuring treatment adherence, symptom management, and the patient’s overall well-being (Götze et al., 2014). However, caregiving is often associated with physical, emotional, and psychological burdens. Prolonged caregiving responsibilities commonly lead to stress, anxiety, depression, fatigue, and financial strain among caregivers. Balancing caregiving responsibilities with family life further increases this burden (Germain et al., 2017; Üzar-Özçetin & Dursun, 2020).

### ***Cancer Caregivers' Mental Health***

After a cancer diagnosis, patients and their caregivers face many cancer-related stressful experiences and financial challenges. These include costly diagnostic tests, treatments, and their side effects, follow-up examinations, as well as uncertainty and fear regarding possible recurrence (relapse) and metastasis (Kent et al., 2016). As a result, the psychological health of patients suffering from this disease and their family caregivers is more adversely affected compared to those dealing with other illnesses (Fekete et al., 2017).

Due to the need to fulfil numerous responsibilities and tasks, cancer-related experiences are often burdensome and stressful for family caregivers (Heckel et al., 2015). The burden experienced by caregivers is influenced by the severity of the patient’s symptoms, the age and gender of both the patient and the caregiver, their relationship with each other, and the caregiver’s own health status (Jeong et al., 2017; Heckel et al., 2018). Following cancer surgery and chemotherapy, patients’ health often deteriorates further, which increases caregiving responsibilities and, consequently, the burden on caregivers. Burden, anxiety, and stress are common problems among caregivers, which negatively affect their physical health, overall well-being, and health-related quality of life (HRQL), and also have adverse effects on the health of patients with cancer (Lee et al., 2015). Conversely, patients’ psychological distress can also significantly affect family caregivers (Groß et al., 2005).

Sociodemographic variables also affected the caregiver burden (Adelman et al., 2014). Similarly, Rha et al. (2015) found that FCs with higher levels of education reported better quality of life. Li et al. (2018) reported that higher educational levels are associated with lower caregiver burden. This is because highly educated FCs have a better understanding of the cancer diagnosis and treatment process, which helps reduce their burden. In fact, caregiver burden affects the physical and psychosocial well-being of FCs (Girgis et al., 2013). Compared to males, female caregivers reported lower well-being and poorer physical health status, and they exhibited higher levels of burden and depression (Pinquart &

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Sörensen, 2006). The quality of life of caregivers of cancer patients tends to decrease due to the increasing caregiving burden (Hartnett et al., 2016). Duggleby et al. (2016) found that male gender, higher general self-efficacy, and lower levels of burden are positively associated with improvements in caregivers' mental health. Wood et al.'s (2019) study found that younger caregivers experience greater burden because their caregiving responsibilities interfere with their personal and social activities

Informal caregivers often prioritize patients' needs over their own, which adversely affects their quality of life (Quality of Life—QoL), and this continues to decline as the disease progresses (Duimering et al., 2020). However, if caregivers possess positive strengths such as resilience, their quality of life remains protected even under highly adverse circumstances, and they are able to successfully fulfil all caregiving-related responsibilities. Therefore, to understand what the psychological health of caregivers is like when they possess positive strengths such as resilience, the present study reviews the findings of several previous studies and has prepared a review-based research paper.

### ***Resilience***

Resilience is related to an individual's ability to overcome adversity, recover, and become stronger (Papastavrou et al., 2012). Resilience is known as a positive psychological process that promotes adaptation by reducing the negative effects of traumatic situations. The protective factors associated with resilience include individual characteristics, temperament, intelligence, cognitive abilities, the quality of interpersonal relationships during childhood, environmental factors, planning ability, self-determination, self-reflection, self-confidence, and self-control (Hornor, 2017). Similarly, positive social relationships can also promote resilience, thereby enhancing positivity in family relationships. Palacio et al. (2018) stated that resilience represents a positive mechanism for change that develops over time and serves as a protective factor against psychological distress. Thus, resilient individuals can experience adversity while maintaining or regaining well-being. They don't just endure stress—they use it as an opportunity to grow or learn. Therefore, resilience is not merely the absence of psychological problems, but the presence of positive psychological strengths that enable individuals to thrive despite adversity.

### ***Resilience and Cancer Caregivers' Mental Health***

Access to resources that promote well-being further strengthens caregivers' resilience. When resilient caregivers have a protective shield of resources such as informational materials, respite care services, and financial assistance, these resources offer practical support during difficult times and help in building a strong support system, which contributes to their overall resilience (Chua et al., 2020). Mithesh and Sheelam (2023) stated in their review that caregivers who possess resilience demonstrate adaptability, positivity, and effective communication, which play an important role in coping with the challenges of caregiving. Cheng et al. (2022) found that mindfulness and relaxation techniques (such as meditation and deep-breathing exercises) help caregivers manage stress and develop emotional resilience. Maintaining a positive outlook even in adverse circumstances and adapting oneself according to the situation are key characteristics of resilient caregivers. They perceive challenges as opportunities for growth and learning (Chen et al., 2020). Resilient caregivers recognize the uncertainty associated with cancer and learn to adjust their expectations and plans accordingly (Gibbons et al., 2019). This aspect of resilience becomes crucial for caregivers as they navigate constantly changing medical conditions and the ever-changing demands of caregiving (Ağaç & Üzar-Özçetin, 2022).

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Resilient caregivers possess high self-efficacy and provide adequate care by recognizing their own capabilities (Van Hof et al., 2023). Effective communication is also a contributing factor to caregiver resilience. Resilient caregivers are skilled communicators — they clearly express their needs, seek assistance when necessary, and maintain open communication with healthcare professionals, family members, and the care recipient (Ellington et al., 2018). A clear sense of purpose and a commitment to their loved ones' well-being strengthen caregivers' resilience. This provides them with the strength to move forward during difficult times and the ability to remain engaged in caregiving activities even in moments of fatigue. It allows them to experience a more profound sense of meaning (Kelly et al., 2019).

A resilient coping style reduces the risk of caregiver burden and promotes adaptation (Palacio et al., 2020). Promoting a resilient coping style significantly reduces emotional distress related to the illness, the changes across the different dimensions (biological, emotional, sociofamily, spiritual), and the significant emotional and physical demands of caregiving for families (Goldzweig et al., 2013). Another study found that caregivers with a high-resilience coping style and religious beliefs report lower levels of depression and burden, as well as a higher quality of life (Pessotti et al., 2018). Additionally, caregivers of patients with metastatic cancer who had a resilient coping style used strategies based on cognitive reappraisal, acceptance, and planning, which in turn enhanced their sense of benefit, personal growth, and optimism (Davydov et al., 2010; Rosenberg et al., 2013; Saria et al., 2017). Resilient coping strategies can positively impact well-being and promote active coping to reduce stress associated with illness (Molina et al., 2014; Tomás et al., 2012).

Some studies suggest that social support reduces caregiver burden (Jeong & An, 2017). Moreover, higher levels of social support are associated with better adjustment to life with cancer and improved psychological health in both cancer patients and their family caregivers (Kent et al., 2016; Leroy et al., 2016). Ong et al. (2018) found that caregivers' resilience and caregiver burden are mediated by perceived social support. It means when caregivers feel supported by people around them, their resilience helps reduce their sense of burden. The qualitative results indicate that family and professional support, along with religious and spiritual beliefs, positive communication, are important factors that enhance resilience in families in the context of illness (Greeff & Thiel, 2012).

Resilience was not related to gender; male and female caregivers had similar levels of resilience (Lin et al., 2020). Higher resilience was positively linked to a better quality of life for caregivers. Higher resilience was negatively linked to depressive symptoms. Thus, caregivers with greater resilience showed fewer depressive symptoms (Dias et al., 2016). A study conducted in Colombia among caregivers of patients with advanced cancer found that resilience, recognition of the positive aspects of caregiving, and perceived competence reduced caregiver burden; these factors may serve as protective factors in the context of illness (Palacio et al., 2018). The findings of Smith et al. (2008) also indicate that individuals with higher resilience demonstrate better quality of life and improved mental health.

## **DISCUSSION**

Resilience refers to an individual's capacity to adjust to adversity, endure challenging circumstances, and ultimately overcome difficulties. A person's level of resilience plays a crucial role in determining their ability to cope effectively with life stressors. In the context of serious illnesses such as cancer, resilience emerges as a vital psychological resource, not only for patients but also for their caregivers. Individuals with higher resilience are better

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able to preserve their psychological well-being despite the demanding nature of cancer, experiencing lower levels of caregiver burden, depression, anxiety, stress, fear, and related difficulties. This adaptive capacity enables them to participate more actively in treatment processes and contributes to an improved quality of life.

Previous research indicates that cancer patients who possess resilience tend to show better health outcomes, and this also has a positive effect on the well-being of their caregivers. Similarly, caregivers who have resilience are better able to maintain their quality of life and overall health even under stressful caregiving conditions. Their resilience, in turn, has a positive impact on patients' health outcomes as well. These findings highlight the importance of interventions that simultaneously target both patients and caregivers, commonly referred to as dyadic interventions. Such resilience-focused dyadic approaches, by effectively understanding and addressing the interconnected needs of patients and their caregivers, provide significant benefits to their health as well as to the broader healthcare system. Therefore, in conclusion, the presence of positive qualities such as resilience in both patients and their caregivers is extremely essential to ensure their mental health remains good.

### ***Limitations and Future Research Directions***

Despite its contributions, this review has several limitations that should be addressed in future research. First, as a narrative review, the findings may benefit from validation through a systematic review of the literature. Second, the review focuses primarily on caregiver health, which presents a partial perspective, as patients' health status directly influences caregiver well-being. Future studies should therefore explore the reciprocal relationship between patient and caregiver health.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, resilience enables individuals to maintain optimism, adaptive thinking, and emotional balance in the face of adversity. By exploring caregivers' mental health within the broader cancer trajectory, this paper highlights a critical yet frequently neglected dimension of the caregiving experience. The findings underscore the significance of caregiver resilience and psychological well-being as integral components of comprehensive cancer care. Furthermore, this work enhances understanding of the multifaceted challenges encountered by cancer caregivers and emphasizes the need for resilience-based strategies and interventions to support them effectively.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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