

Navigating the  
**Caregiver**  
**Continuum**  
from Diagnosis to Advocacy

Presented by Alyssa Nutile & Erica Stearns



# Welcome!

We are Alyssa Nutile and Erica Stearns, co-founders of Caffeinated Caregivers, a caffeine-fueled community that seeks to peel back the layers of what it means to be a medically complex caregiver.

Alyssa is a disabled adult, caregiver, advocate, media producer, and internet marketer.

Erica is a disabled adult, caregiver, researcher, advocate, and caregiver peer support specialist.



# Purpose

## **VALIDATION**

Recognizes and validates the diverse experiences and efforts of caregivers at different stages.

## **GUIDANCE**

Provides a roadmap for understanding personal growth and challenges in caregiving.

## **EMPATHY**

Fosters empathy among professionals and support networks by highlighting caregiver's evolving needs.

## **EMPOWERMENT**

Encourages caregivers to acknowledge their progress and potential for impactful advocacy.



# Why is this relevant?

According to the 2023 U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the mental health and well-being of parents:

- 41% of parents say that most days they are so stressed they cannot function.
- Nearly 50% of parents describe their stress as overwhelming, compared to 26% of other adults.

@caffeinated\_caregivers

**Researchers: “I wonder if caregivers are doing okay? I guess we’ll have to do a ton of academic studies before we can know for sure!”**

**Caregivers, looking like this everyday:**



# Unique Stressors for Caregivers

Caregivers, especially those of children with disabilities and medical complexities, often face additional stressors:

- Children's health and safety concerns
- Financial strain and time demands
- Isolation and lack of community support
- Cultural pressures and future uncertainties

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**When your household doesn't meet the requirements for SSI, but doesn't make enough money to cover all your expenses...**



# Underrepresented & Overlooked

The role of a caregiver is demanding as it involves countless roles and responsibilities. And yet, caregivers of children with disabilities often face greater challenges and receive less recognition and support, leaving them particularly vulnerable to mental health struggles.

# What is the Caregiver Continuum?

The Caregiver Continuum is a framework that highlights the unique and evolving nature of caregiving, shaped by factors such as health conditions, cultural backgrounds, family dynamics, resources, and caregiving philosophies. It underscores how advocacy and support must adapt to meet the diverse and changing needs of each family.

# Key Principles

## NOT LINEAR, STATIC, OR FIXED

Movement between stages is fluid; regression and progression are natural responses to changing circumstances.

## INDIVIDUALIZED EXPERIENCE

Each caregiver's journey is unique and influenced by personal, familial, and external factors.

## CONTINUOUS GROWTH

A caregiver's journey includes ongoing learning, adaptation, and transformation throughout the caregiving experience.



# INFLUENCING FACTORS

## **CHILD'S HEALTH STATUS:**

Fluctuations can cause caregivers to move between stages, revisiting earlier phases during crises.

## **SUPPORT SYSTEMS:**

Quality and availability of support significantly impact a caregiver's ability to progress and sustain efforts.

## **RESILIENCE AND RESOURCES:**

Individual coping mechanisms and access to information and resources play crucial roles.

## **EXTERNAL CIRCUMSTANCES:**

Broader environmental and societal factors such as financial stability, access to healthcare services, employment flexibility, and social support systems.

# Questions for Professionals:

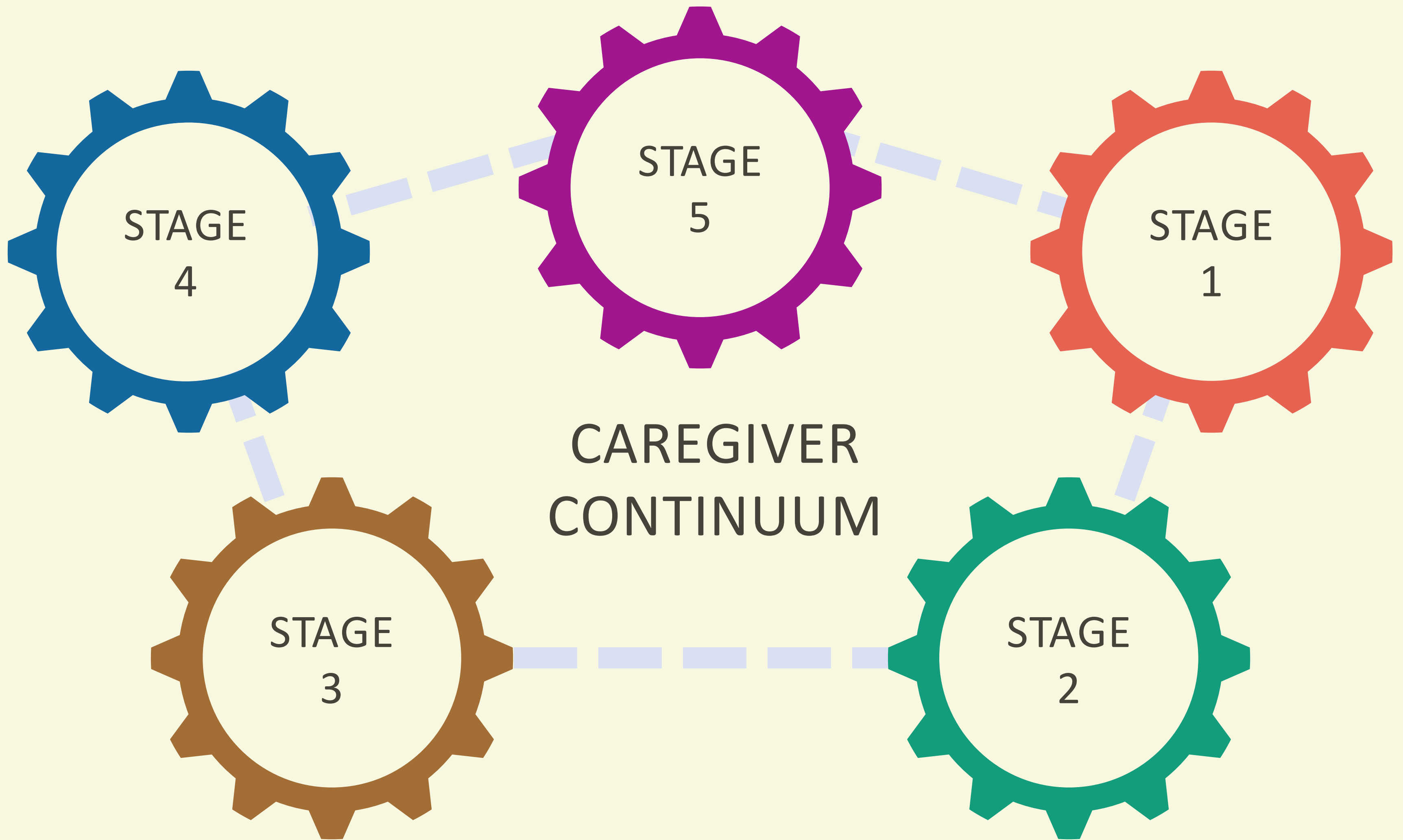
- Have you noticed that caregivers go through different stages in their journey, and do you check in to see where they are?
- Do you look for outside factors, like financial stress or lack of support, that could be affecting a caregiver—and how have you helped?
- How often do you ask caregivers how they're doing and what they need to ensure your support is truly helpful?

# Questions for Caregivers:

- Have you ever felt stuck in your caregiving journey, unsure of how or when you'll be able to move forward?
- Do you sometimes see other caregivers managing better and wonder why you're not there yet, or if you're falling behind?
- Have you ever questioned if it's normal to be suddenly thrown back into survival mode without warning, even after feeling stable for a while?

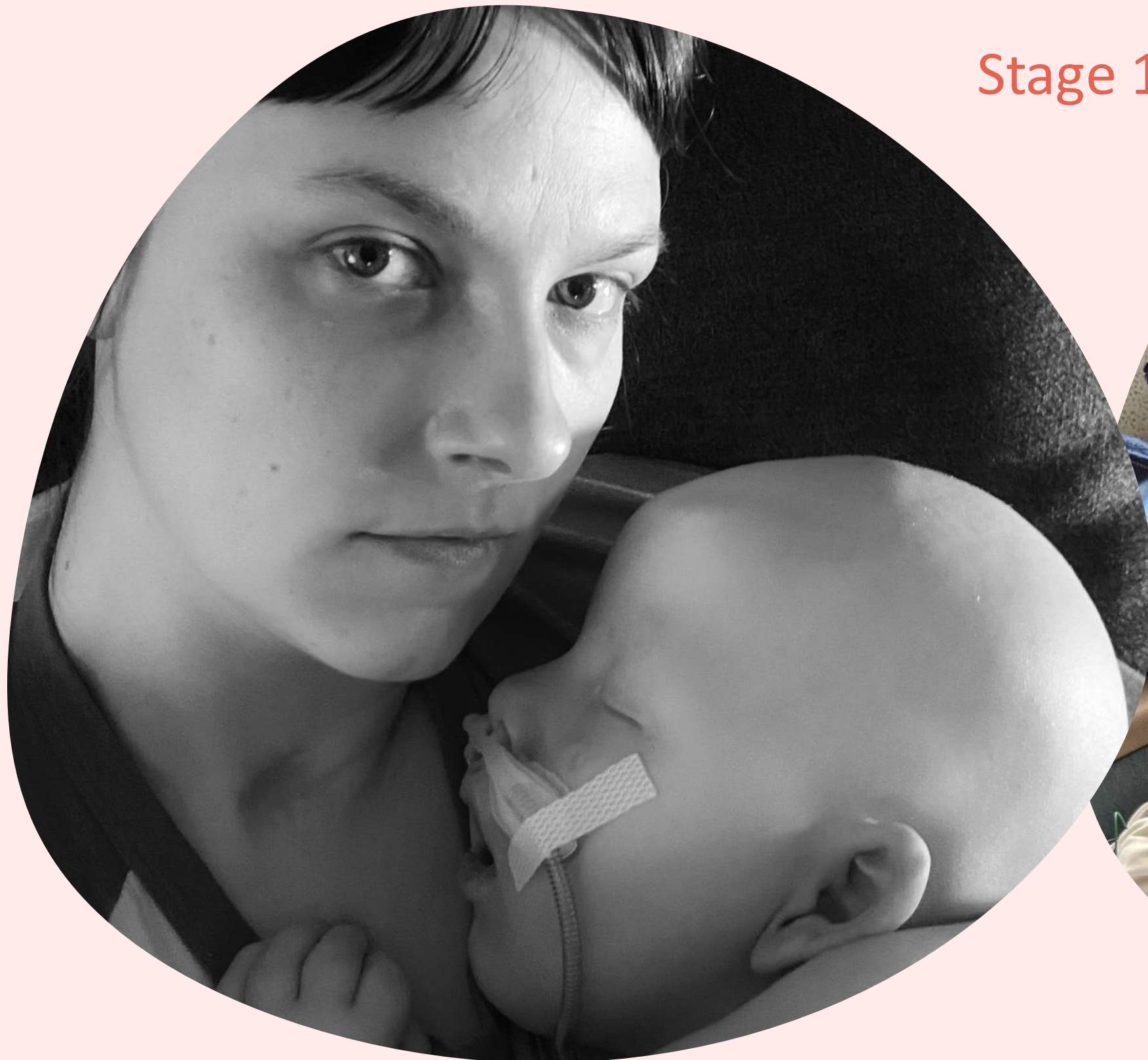
The  
Five Stages  
of the  
Caregiver Continuum





# Survival & Adjustment

Stage 1



Stage 1

# Survival & Adjustment

## **NAVIGATING THE UNEXPECTED**

Caregivers are thrust into a relentless cycle of crises and chronic stress, constantly fighting for their child's survival while navigating a future of unending instability.

## **TURBULENT EMOTIONAL LANDSCAPE**

Caregivers are often consumed by shock, confusion, overwhelm, isolation, and uncertainty as they struggle to adapt to their "new norm."

# Caregiver Characteristics

## Stage 1: Survival and Adjustment

### **VIGILANCE AND INFORMATION GATHERING:**

A constant seeking for knowledge about the child's condition, treatment options, and care requirements.

### **ESTABLISHING ROUTINES:**

Struggling to integrate new care tasks into daily life while managing medical crises and survival needs.

### **EMOTIONALLY OVERLOADED:**

Coping with intense grief-related emotions and uncertainty, while seeking initial support systems to help navigate the overwhelming journey.

# Advocacy Evolution

## Stage 1: Survival and Adjustment

### **GAINING FOUNDATIONAL ADVOCACY SKILLS**

Caregivers begin their advocacy journey by navigating the complexities of medical care and treatment for their child. This phase is marked by learning to communicate with medical professionals, understanding treatment options, and advocating for immediate needs. Advocacy in this stage is often reactive and focused on stabilizing their child's health and ensuring basic support.

- Ensuring doctors fully explain treatment options.
- Requesting second opinions or clarifying medication side effects.
- Securing necessary services through insurance.

# Conditions for Progress

## Stage 1: Survival and Adjustment

### **CHILD'S HEALTH STATUS:**

Initial medical stability, understanding of the child's diagnosis, and (ideally) transition from hospital to home while adapting to new care routines.

### **SUPPORT SYSTEMS:**

Immediate access to healthcare teams, in addition to emotional support from family, friends, and community.

### **RESILIENCE AND RESOURCES:**

The ability to absorb and adapt to new caregiving routines, along with the availability of resources for quality medical care of their child.

### **EXTERNAL CIRCUMSTANCES:**

Access to health insurance, essential services, employment flexibility, and housing stability.

# Management & Stabilization

Stage 2



Stage 2

# Management & Stabilization

## **BALANCING HOME AND CARE**

Caregivers are deeply immersed in the nonstop demands of managing their child's daily medical needs while striving to maintain some sense of normalcy at home.

## **NAVIGATING COMPLEX AND CHRONIC STRESS**

Caregivers endure constant stress as they handle a continuous cycle of medical appointments, hospitalizations, and complex systems, while also managing overwhelming administrative tasks.

# Caregiver Characteristics

## Stage 2: Management and Stabilization

### **ROUTINE MANAGEMENT:**

Fully consumed with managing the child's medical care and establishing and maintaining detailed care schedules and routines to support their health and well-being.

### **RESOURCE COORDINATION:**

Overwhelmed by navigating complex medical systems and coordinating with insurance, medical equipment suppliers, and healthcare providers.

### **EMOTIONAL AND PHYSICAL EXHAUSTION:**

High levels of stress and fatigue are prevalent due to the intensive demands of juggling medical care and administrative tasks.

# Advocacy Evolution

## Stage 2: Management and Stabilization

### **ACTIVE AND ASSERTIVE ADVOCACY**

As caregivers progress in their advocacy, they take a leading role in managing their child's care, ensuring that medical and educational needs are fully addressed while navigating complex systems to secure necessary support and often making critical, high-pressure decisions to support their child's well-being.

- Coordinating care by scheduling and managing appointments.
- Appealing insurance denials to get coverage for essential treatments, services, therapies, or medical equipment.
- Advocating for an IEP at school to ensure the child receives appropriate services or accommodations.

# Conditions for Progress

## Stage 2: Management and Stabilization

### **CHILD'S HEALTH STATUS:**

Stabilized medical routines and predictable care needs.

### **SUPPORT SYSTEMS:**

Access to respite care, social connections that provide emotional and logistical help, and partnerships with professionals who recognize and address caregiver burnout.

### **RESILIENCE AND RESOURCES:**

Building the emotional capacity to manage day-to-day demands and resources to support the family's ongoing care needs.

### **EXTERNAL CIRCUMSTANCES:**

Consistent access to support, services, and resources.

# Self-Advocacy & Resilience

Stage 3



Stage 3

# Self-Advocacy & Resilience

## **SELF-AWARENESS AND REBUILDING**

Caregivers recognize the importance of their own well-being and begin to prioritize self-care alongside caregiving duties.

## **LEARNING AND ADAPTING**

Caregivers reflect on what has worked and what hasn't, developing effective coping strategies and gaining resilience to better handle future challenges.

# Caregiver Characteristics

## Stage 3: Self-Advocacy and Resilience

### **SELF-CARE PRACTICES:**

Reframing “self-care” to begin incorporating activities and routines that support mental, emotional, and physical health.

### **BOUNDARY SETTING:**

Learning to say no and setting limits to prevent burnout for the child and the caregiver.

### **SEEKING SUPPORT:**

Learning how to ask for help from our community and engaging with therapy, support groups, and community resources for personal development.

# Advocacy Evolution

## Stage 3: Self-Advocacy and Resilience

### **HOLISTIC ADVOCACY**

In this stage, advocacy extends beyond the child to include the caregiver's well-being. Caregivers begin setting boundaries, prioritizing self-care, and advocating for their own needs as well as their child's, leading to a more holistic approach. Caregivers begin to reframe self-care as an essential part of caregiving, not a luxury, and advocate for their own needs alongside their child's. They also help others, including professionals and support networks, understand the importance of caregiver self-care in maintaining resilience.

- Setting boundaries to protect mental health and prevent burnout.
- Educating others on the importance of caregiver well-being, ensuring professionals and family members recognize its value.
- Balancing caregiving and self-advocacy by seeking support services like respite care or mental health resources.

# Conditions for Progress

## Stage 3: Self-Advocacy and Resilience

### **CHILD'S HEALTH STATUS:**

Managed care needs that allow caregivers to focus on self-care.

### **SUPPORT SYSTEMS:**

Support networks that validate and encourage caregiver well-being and access to mental health services or therapy.

### **RESILIENCE AND RESOURCES:**

Caregivers can prioritize self-care while balancing caregiving duties and the emotional strength to set boundaries and delegate tasks.

### **EXTERNAL CIRCUMSTANCES:**

Adequate resources to access self-care and community programs that support the caregiver's well-being.

# Community Engagement

Stage 4



Stage 4

# Community Engagement

## **CONNECTION PHASE:**

Caregivers extend their focus outward, engaging with and contributing to the broader disability and caregiver communities.

## **SHARING AND COLLABORATION:**

Building networks with other caregivers and professionals to share experiences, resources, and support.

# Caregiver Characteristics

Stage 4: Community Engagement

## **PEER SUPPORT:**

Participating in or leading support groups and online communities.

## **RESOURCE SHARING:**

Contributing knowledge and experiences to assist others in similar situations.

## **PUBLIC AWARENESS:**

Involvement in activities that raise awareness about specific issues and caregiving challenges.

# Advocacy Evolution

## Stage 4: Community Engagement

### **COLLABORATIVE ADVOCACY**

Caregivers in this stage engage more actively with broader communities, advocating for other caregivers and contributing to support networks. Advocacy becomes collaborative and outward-focused, building connections that benefit others facing similar challenges.

- Mentoring newer caregivers through their early advocacy challenges.
- Participating in or leading support groups for families of children with disabilities.
- Organizing community events or fundraisers to support advocacy causes.

# Conditions for Progress

## Stage 4: Community Engagement

### **CHILD'S HEALTH STATUS:**

Stable health that allows caregivers to extend focus to others.

### **SUPPORT SYSTEMS:**

Established relationships with other caregivers, professionals, and community groups that foster collaboration and advocacy.

### **RESILIENCE AND RESOURCES:**

Confidence in caregiving, a desire to mentor others, and the time and resources available to engage in broader community support.

### **EXTERNAL CIRCUMSTANCES:**

Access to platforms for organizing or contributing to community initiatives and societal support for caregiver-led advocacy and support networks.

# Systemic Advocacy & Leadership

Stage 5



Stage 5

# Systemic Advocacy & Leadership

## **TRANSFORMATION PHASE:**

Caregivers take on leadership roles to influence systemic changes that benefit the broader caregiving, disability, and medical communities.

## **IMPACT AND LEGACY:**

Efforts are directed toward long-term meaningful improvements in policies, practices, and societal perceptions.

# Caregiver Characteristics

Stage 5: Systemic Advocacy and Leadership

## **POLICY INVOLVEMENT:**

Engaging with policymakers to advocate for legislative changes.

## **ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERSHIP:**

Founding or leading nonprofits, advocacy groups, or initiatives aimed at systemic improvement.

## **PUBLIC SPEAKING AND EDUCATION:**

Sharing experiences and expertise through conferences, workshops, and media engagements.

# Advocacy Evolution

## Stage 5: Systemic Advocacy and Leadership

### **STRATEGIC ADVOCACY**

At this stage, caregivers take on leadership roles in advocacy, working to create meaningful systemic change that benefits their family and the wider caregiving, healthcare, and disability community. Advocacy becomes strategic and focused on influencing policies, legislation, and societal change.

- Advocating for laws and regulations to improve healthcare access, disability rights, and caregiver support.
- Collaborating with researchers to contribute to studies and advancements in care.
- Leading initiatives or organizations aimed at supporting caregivers.
- Serving as spokespersons or representatives for caregiver communities on public platforms.

# Conditions for Sustainability

## Stage 5: Systemic Advocacy and Leadership

### **CHILD'S HEALTH STATUS:**

Consistent and manageable medical needs allow the caregiver to focus on larger advocacy work.

### **SUPPORT SYSTEMS:**

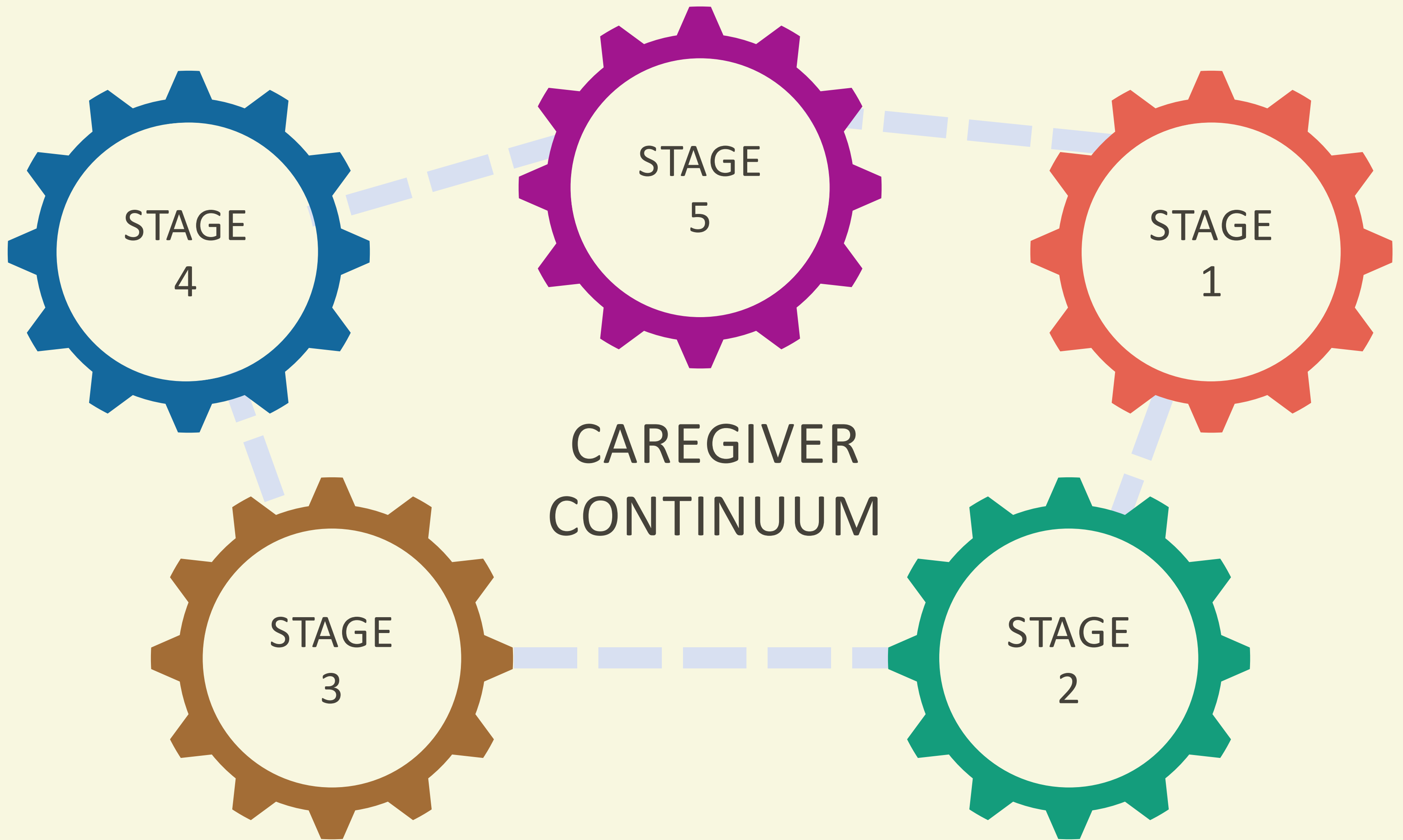
Strong professional networks, partnerships with advocacy groups, and emotional and logistical support from family and peers.

### **RESILIENCE AND RESOURCES:**

Caregivers must have leadership skills, confidence in advocacy roles, and the time, energy, and financial resources for sustained advocacy efforts.

### **EXTERNAL CIRCUMSTANCES:**

Recognition and collaboration from professionals and institutions to influence policy, research, or community services.



# Embracing the Caregiver Continuum

The Caregiver Continuum helps both caregivers and professionals understand the ups and downs of the caregiving journey.

## **FOR CAREGIVERS**

Validates the experience, showing that moving through different stages—sometimes forward, sometimes back—is normal.

## **FOR PROFESSIONALS**

Offers insight into the challenges caregivers face, leading to better, more tailored support.

# Questions for Professionals:

- How can I better recognize where caregivers are on the Caregiver Continuum and adapt my support to their specific stage?
- What steps can I take to provide more comprehensive resources and support for caregivers, including their own well-being and self-care?
- How can I work with caregivers to ensure their voices are heard and their advocacy efforts are supported within medical and educational systems?

# Dear Professionals:

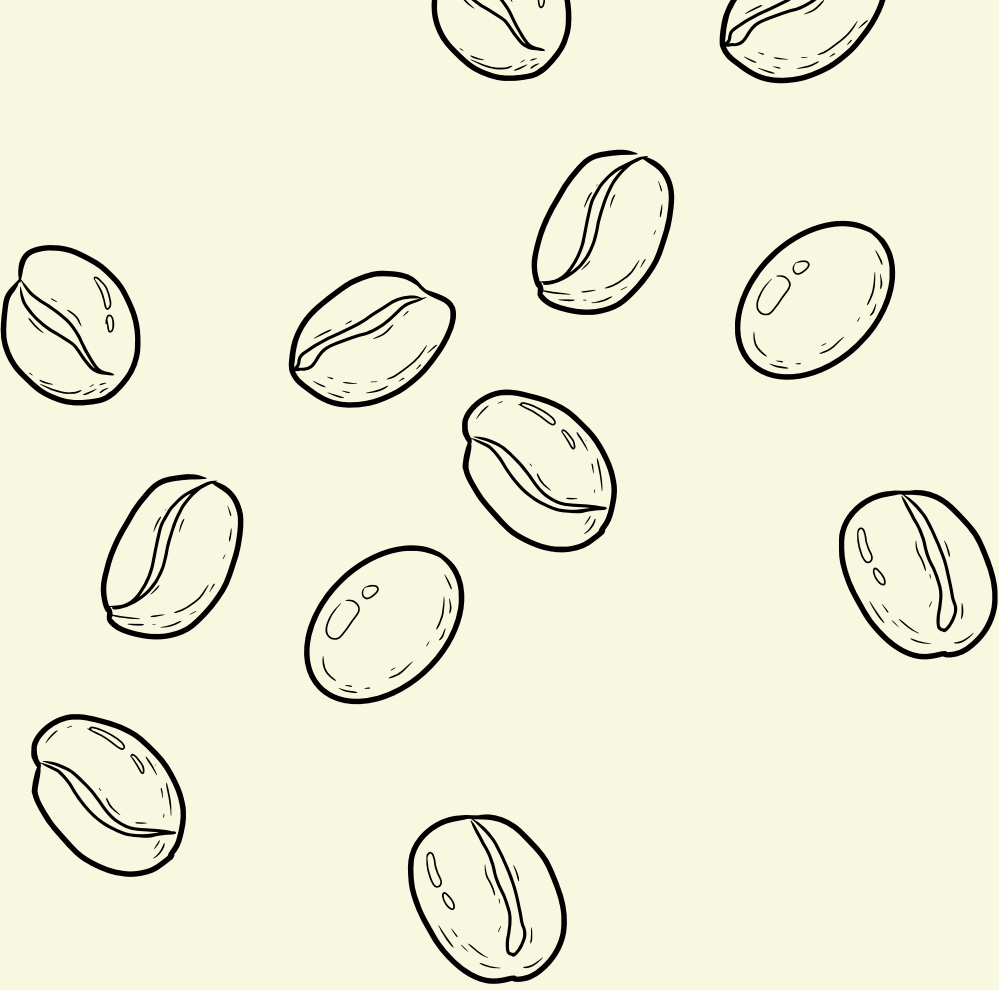
Please remember that at every stage of the Caregiver Continuum, **caregivers are making meaningful contributions through their care and advocacy**—whether seen or unseen, their efforts matter.

# Questions for Caregivers:

- How has caregiving and advocacy evolved for you?
- How have you re-defined self-care, and is advocacy a part of that?
- What stage is the peak for you? (Hint: It might not be systemic advocacy, and that is okay!)

# Dear Caregivers:

Please remember that no matter where you are on your caregiving journey, your strength, dedication, and love are **the foundations that support not only your child but also inspire and uplift those around you.**



Thank you!!

[www.caffeinatedcaregivers.com](http://www.caffeinatedcaregivers.com)

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**Society: What is the root cause of caregiver mental health issues? Could it be the financial strain, lack of support, sleep deprivation, social stigma, etc? What a mystery!**

**Caregivers:**



**Mostly those aspects.**