

DUKE DEMENTIA FAMILY SUPPORT PROGRAM

Caregiver Connections

An Educational Webinar Series With The Experts

**The presentation will begin shortly.
Thank you for your patience!**

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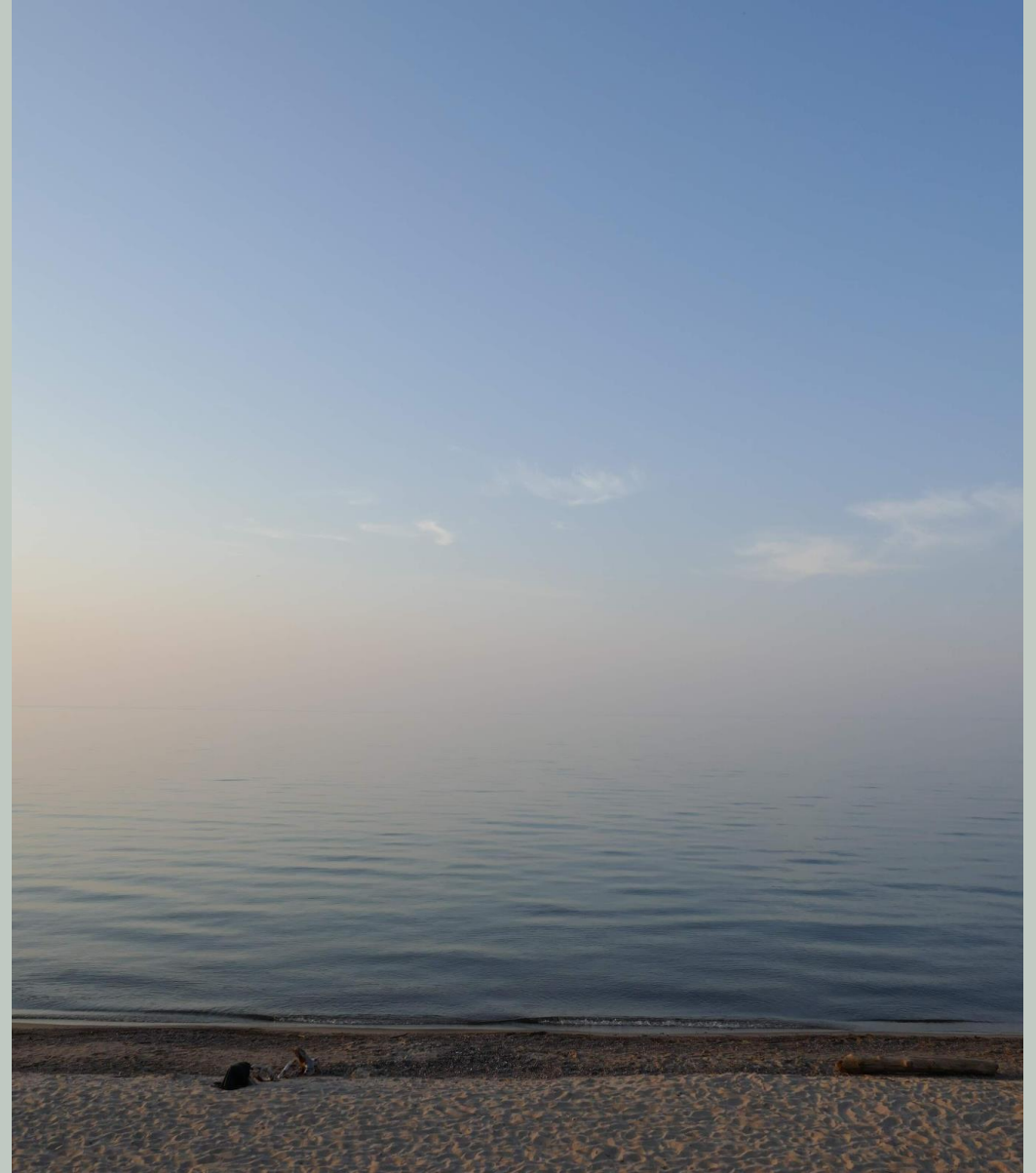
Be Present, Open Up, and Do What Matters: Cultivating Psychological Flexibility to Cope with Caregiver Stress

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Tailored Brain Health


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Agenda

- Defining psychological flexibility
- Research on psychological flexibility and caregivers
- Self-assessment on psychological flexibility
- Experiential exercises on key processes of psychological flexibility
- Q&A
- Resources



Importance of Learning Coping Strategies as a Caregiver

- Being a caregiver can be meaningful and rewarding.
- It can also be stressful:
 - Negative impact of caregiving on mental health (e.g., greater levels of depressive and anxiety symptoms)
 - Lower quality of life
 - Decreased participation in valued activities

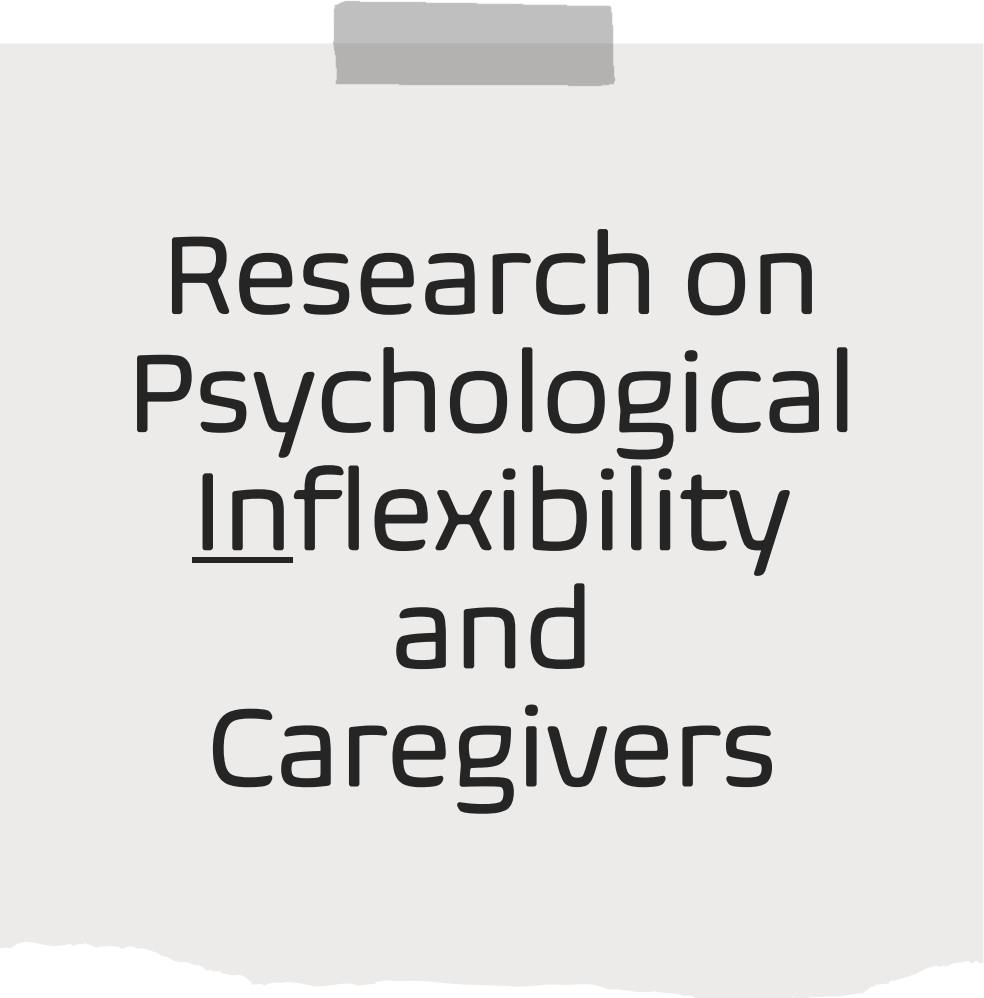
Psychological Inflexibility vs. Flexibility

What is Psychological Inflexibility?



[Photo credit](#)

- We tend to avoid or try to get rid of painful thoughts and feelings.
- Our strategies to cope with pain often provide **short-term relief**.
 - We comfort ourselves with food, alcohol, or other substances.
 - We may scroll through our phones mindlessly.
 - We try to suppress our thoughts and feelings
- **In the long-term**, these strategies typically bring us further away from our values and leading a meaningful life.



Research on Psychological Inflexibility and Caregivers

- Lappalainen and colleagues (2021):
 - Psychological inflexibility and thought suppression significantly explained caregivers' symptoms of depression and anxiety.
 - Psychological inflexibility also predicted lower quality of life in these caregivers.



Psychological Flexibility

- The ability to feel and think with openness
- Attend to your experience of the present moment
- Move your life in directions that are important to you
- Build habits that allow you to live in accordance with your values and aspirations



Psychological Flexibility in Action

- When you are psychologically flexible, you:
 - Are present in the life you have
 - Know what you care about and live in a way that's consistent with your values
 - Accept and allow discomfort and pain instead of avoiding it
 - Notice and unhook from unhelpful thoughts
 - Engage in flexible perspective-taking
 - Take committed action towards what matters most in your life



Psychological Flexibility in Action

- Psychological flexibility looks like:
 - Caring for your loved one even when you feel like you have nothing left to give
 - Making a change to pursue meaningful work even when it's intimidating
 - Moving your body even when your mind screams "I don't want to!"
 - Being a caring and loving partner even when you are annoyed with your partner or have had a long day
 - Having a difficult conversation with a friend because you care about this friendship

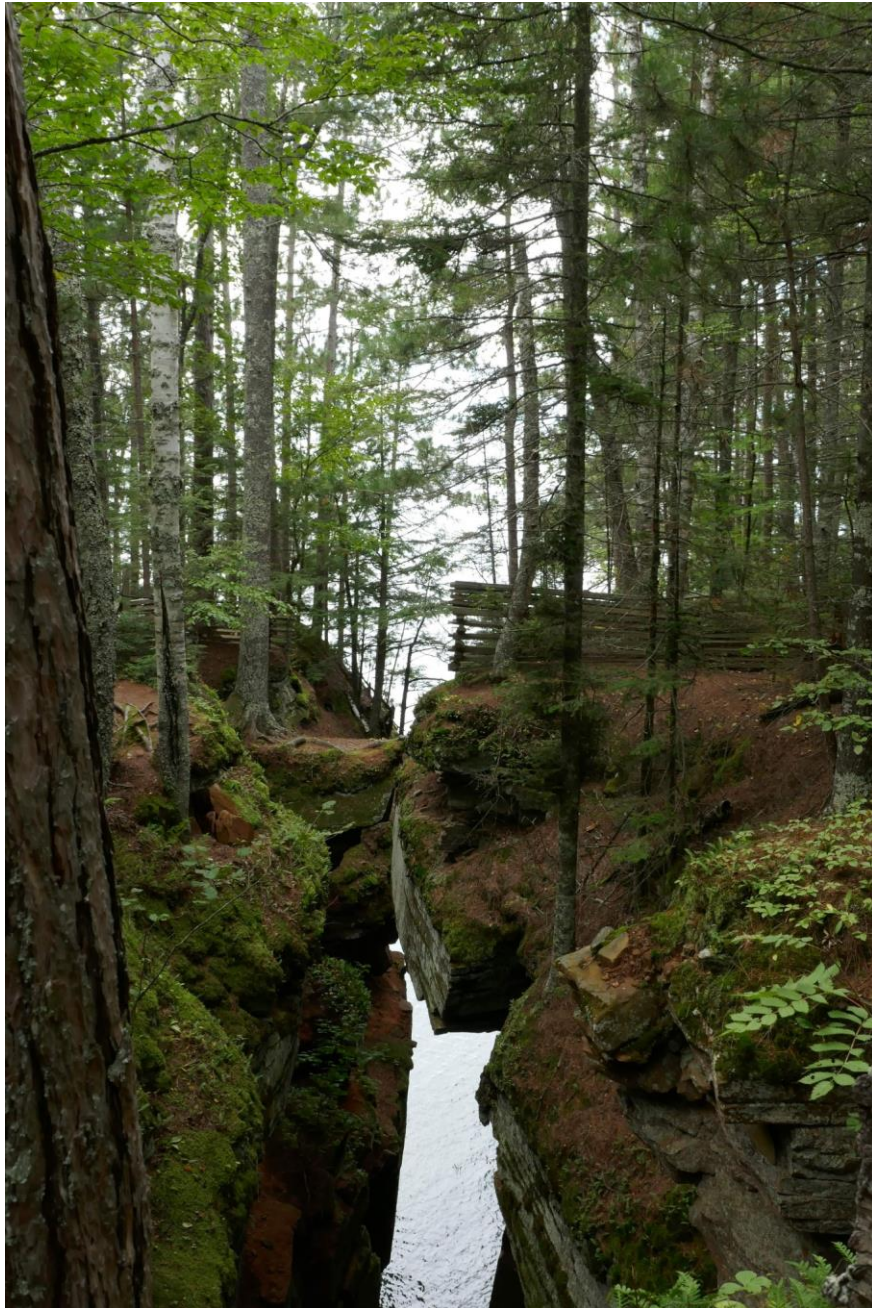
Be present:
Make contact with your inner and external experience



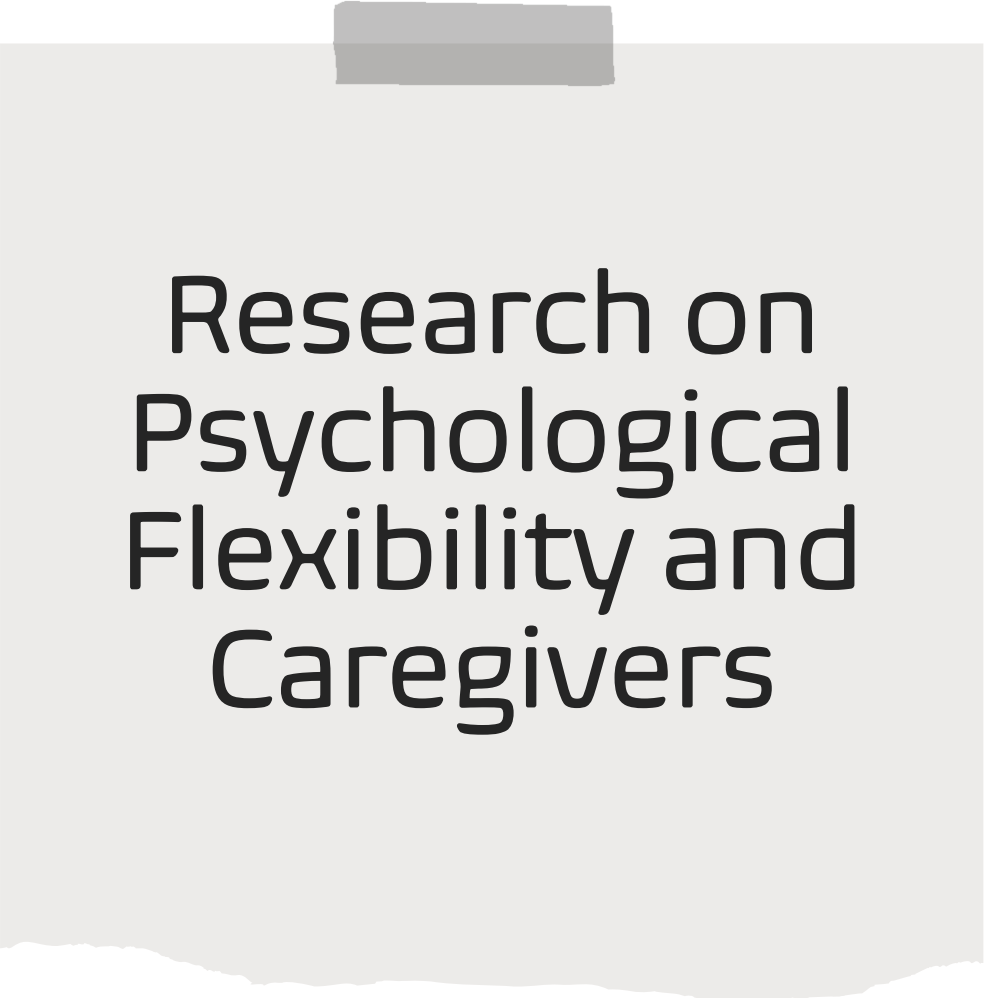
**Psychological
Flexibility**

Open up:
Make room for painful thoughts
and feelings

Do what matters:
Values-guided action



“Just as deep roots and flexible branches keep trees from falling over during windstorms, psychological flexibility will help you better withstand the turbulence of life by *rooting* you in your values and helping you to be more flexible in your responses.”




Research on Psychological Flexibility and Caregivers

- Caregivers often cannot change their role or the course of dementia.
- Often grieve the changes or loss of relationship with the care receiver
- Managing other roles and responsibilities ("*sandwich generation*")
- Systematic review of 21 clinical trials:
 - Improving psychological flexibility can help caregivers of people with dementia and other health conditions better cope with stress (Atefi et al., 2023)
- Randomized controlled trials (Losada et al., 2015; Marquez-Gonzalez et al., 2020):
 - Acceptance and Commitment Therapy decreased depression in caregivers

Self-Assessment on Psychological Flexibility

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Never true	Very seldom true	Seldom true	Sometimes true	Frequently true	Almost always true	Always true



Acceptance and Action Questionnaire (AAQ-II)

1. My painful experiences and memories make it difficult for me to live a life that I would value.
2. I am afraid of my feelings.
3. I worry about not being able to control my worries and feelings.
4. My painful memories prevent me from having a fulfilling life.
5. Emotions cause problems in my life.
6. It seems like most people are handling their lives better than I am.
7. Worries get in the way of my success.

Be present:
Make contact with your inner and external experience



The diagram consists of a large triangle with its vertices pointing towards the three text blocks. The top vertex points to the 'Be present' block, the bottom-left vertex points to the 'Open up' block, and the bottom-right vertex points to the 'Do what matters' block. The text 'Psychological Flexibility' is centered within the triangle.

**Psychological
Flexibility**

Open up:
Make room for painful thoughts
and feelings

Do what matters:
Values-guided action

Being Present

Living on Autopilot



- We often live in a state of autopilot (*"going through the motions"*)
- Living on autopilot can lead to automatic and unhelpful habits
 - We cut off, miss out, and do things poorly

"Mr. Duffy lived a short distance from his body." – James Joyce

[Photo credit](#)



Being Present

- Being present has 3 key characteristics:
 - We can choose what to pay attention to
 - Focuses on the present moment
 - Nonjudgmental, open, and curious



Guided Practice: Leaves on a Stream

- Imagine in your mind's eye being by a stream
- Notice your thoughts and gently placing them on a leaf
- Gently place this leaf onto the stream and allow it to float away

Additional Practices

- Set your phone alarm to go off at three random times today and when it goes off, ask yourself: “**What’s happening in my body?**”
- Pay attention to your breath. Notice where your breath moves in your body, its rhythm, and the places where it pauses. Or try a breathing meditation.
- Before eating, make a note of how hungry you are on a scale from **0** (*very hungry*) to **10** (*very full*). Rate your appetite again after eating.

Opening Up



Opening Up

- Accepting and making room for the things that show up internally and get under your skin:

- Thoughts
- Emotions
- Action Urges
- Memories
- Sensations

} TEAMS

- Synonyms:

- Accepting
- Allowing
- Making space for
- Getting curious about
- Being brave about

Guided Practice: Soften, Soothe, and Allow

- Bring to mind a mild to moderately difficult situation.
- Notice the strongest or most difficult emotion associated with this situation.
- Where in your body do you feel this emotion?
- Soften, soothe, and allow this emotion.

Do What Matters



Do What Matters

- Values:
 - “The glue that cements our daily actions to something greater than ourselves and our struggles” (Hill & Sorensen, 2021)
 - Provide a direction to guide you and your actions
 - Deeply personal and freely chosen by you
 - Consist of qualities of action (e.g., compassionate) rather than domains in which you act (e.g., family)





Practice: Connecting to Your Values

- Imagine that one year from now, you are looking back at the difficulty you are facing today. Imagine that you have handled it in the best possible way, behaving like the person you really want to be, deep in your heart.
- From that perspective, answer these questions:
 - What qualities or strengths (e.g., courage, kindness, compassion, persistence, honesty, caring, supportiveness, integrity, love, commitment) did you live by or act upon in the face of this?
 - How did you treat yourself as you dealt with this?
 - How did you treat others that you care about?

Practice: Revitalize with Values

- Pick a few areas of your life that feel important to you right now, perhaps ones that you've been neglecting:

Family

Leisure

Environment

Romantic
partner

Physical self-care

Friendship

Work/education

Creative
expression

Personal growth

Community

Spirituality

Other:

- What do you care most about in these areas that you have chosen?
- What actions could reflect your caring?
- How could this caring spread to other life domains? How could you make your domains more values-rich?

Summary

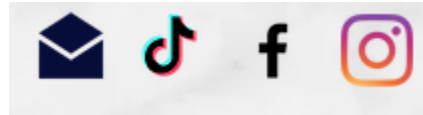
- Psychological flexibility consists of:
 - Being present in your life
 - Noticing your thoughts and feelings without being pushed around by them
 - Allowing and accepting difficult thoughts and feelings
 - Moving in the direction of what is meaningful and most important to you, even in the face of obstacles
- We can cultivate psychological flexibility through regular practice
- Call to action:
 - Go about your week with a “psychological flexibility highlighter”
 - Pay attention to when you are being present, allowing painful thoughts and feeling, and acting in line with your values

Resources

- **Mindfulness Resources:**
 - [Guided Leaves on a Stream Exercise on Youtube](#)
 - [Guided Soften, Soothe, and Allow Exercise](#)
 - Insight Timer app
 - [UCLA MARC's free guided meditations](#)
- **Clarifying Values:**
 - [Value card sort exercise](#)
 - [Values checklist](#)
- **Books:**
 - The Reality Slap by Russ Harris
 - The Happiness Trap by Russ Harris
 - ACT Daily Journal by Diana Hill and Debbie Sorrensen
 - Radical Acceptance by Tara Brach
 - The Mindful Self-Compassion Workbook by Kristin Neff and Christopher Germer



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Thank you for your
time and attention! 😊

Q&A

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