

Caring for the Carer

Carers - looking after yourself

It is all too easy to ignore your own needs when caring for someone with dementia and forget that you matter too. It is important to take steps to safeguard your own health and well-being, as well as other aspects of your life, so that you can continue to cope and retain your confidence. Here are some suggestions.

Try to find out what help may be available in caring for the person with dementia before you need it so you know where to turn when the time comes. Ask the GP, the public health nurse and your local Alzheimer Society of Ireland branch, for example. Be persistent. You have a right to help.

Family and friends

Even though you may be coping well at present, you need to realise that caring for someone with dementia will become increasingly physically and emotionally exhausting.

- Try to involve other family members in the care right from the start so that the responsibility does not all rest on you. Even if they cannot offer day-to-day care, they may be able to look after the person while you have a break or contribute financially to the cost of care.
- Always try to accept help from friends or neighbours when it is offered. If you say you can manage, they may not think to ask again.
- Suggest ways in which people can help so that they are quite clear about what they can do. For example, you might ask them to sit with the person for an hour or take them for a walk, so that you can get on with something else.
- Make it clear that you value people's support and that popping in for a chat or a regular phone call to see how you are can make all the difference.

Your health

See your own GP on a regular basis to check up on your health and make sure he or she is aware of any stresses and problems you are experiencing.

- If you start to feel very depressed or anxious, see your GP as soon as possible. These kinds of feelings are easier to tackle at an early stage.
- Try to make sure you have a well-balanced diet. It will help you to feel better and cope better.
- Make sure you get enough sleep. If your sleep is continually disturbed by the person with dementia, seek advice from professionals.
- Take care to avoid damaging your back if you are helping the person with dementia to move. Ask for advice from an occupational therapist or physiotherapist.
- Regular exercise is vital for your health and will give you more energy. Try to get a walk in the fresh air each day or do some exercises at home.
- If you find you are becoming very stressed, ask your GP to recommend some relaxation or breathing exercises.

Legal and financial

Your financial and legal situation may be affected if you are caring for someone with dementia.

- If you are working and have to give up either temporarily or permanently, check your pension position.
- Check whether you are entitled to benefits and, if so, which ones. You can check this at your local Citizens Information Centre.
- Find out the best way of managing the person's affairs. This may be as a Trustee or the use of an Enduring Power of Attorney.
- Check your own position in regard to the home and finances if the person goes into care or dies.

Time to yourself

Make sure you have some time to yourself to relax or to do something which is just for you. If the person with dementia cannot be left see whether family or friends can give you a break or whether services such as home care or respite care are available locally.

- Try to put aside a little time each day for yourself, if you can, to have a cup of tea and read the paper, to listen to some music or go for a short walk. Don't feel guilty about this. It is important for your well-being.
- Try to get out every week or so to meet a friend or pursue a hobby, or do something else that you find enjoyable and which keeps you in contact with the outside world.
- See if you can have a break for a weekend or a week or so on a regular basis to recharge your batteries.

Conflicting demands

Try to pace yourself. You can only do so much. You may feel torn because you are trying to care for children, look after someone who is unwell or do a job as well as caring for the person with dementia.

- Try to make sure that others close to you understand the problems and can offer you support.
- See whether there are any services for the person with dementia that could relieve you of some of the stress.

Support

Everyone caring for someone with dementia needs support and people with whom they can discuss their problems and feelings rather than bottling them up. You may get the support you need from friends and family, from understanding professionals or from a local support group where you can chat to others who have had similar experiences. To find out about local support groups ask your public health nurse or your local branch of the Alzheimer Society of Ireland.

Congratulate yourself

You may sometimes feel that you have a thankless task. The person with dementia may no longer seem to appreciate your efforts and others may be unaware of just how much you do. You need to pat yourself on the back from time to time:

- for managing to cope day-in day-out with a very difficult situation
- for becoming more flexible and tolerant and finding new strengths and skills which you did not know you possessed
- for being there for someone who needs you.