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## 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, so that you can continue to cope and retain your confidence. Here are some suggestions.

### Information

Try to discover what help or services (such as respite care) may be available in caring for the person with dementia before you need it. That way you will know where to turn when the time comes.

Ask your GP, Social Services and Dementia SA. Contact details may be found in the phone book under Local Government or on the Internet. Provinces and municipalities have differing addresses and numbers. Dementia SA will tell you how to contact your nearest support group. Be persistent if you need support. You have a right to help.

### Family and Friends

Even though you may be coping well at present you need to realize that caring for a person with dementia will probably become more and more demanding, both physically and emotionally.

- Try to involve other family members right from the start so that the responsibility does not rest only with 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 they might be able to contribute financially to the cost of care.
- Always accept appropriate 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 could help. For example, ask them to stay with the person for an hour or to take the patient for a walk, so that you can get on with something else.
- Make it clear that you value people's support and that just popping in for a chat or a regular phone call or message to ask how you are can make all the difference.
- Explain to your family and close friends how dementia can affect a person's behaviour. Carer stress is one of the risk factors for elder abuse. Share information with them. They will then be more able to understand the apparent contradictions in the behaviour of the person, and just how much you have to do and how stressful caring can be.



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## Your health

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

- If you start feeling very depressed, anxious or stressed, see your GP as soon as possible.
- This is easier to tackle at an early stage before it gets out of hand.
- Try to make sure you eat a well-balanced diet. It will help you to feel and cope better.
- Make sure you get enough sleep. If the person with dementia continually disturbs your sleep, ask your doctor, psychiatrist, psychologist or social worker for advice.
- Take care to avoid damaging your back if you are helping the person to move. A physiotherapist will be able to advise you.
- Regular exercise is vital for your health and will give you more energy. Try to walk in the fresh air each day, if you are able to do some exercises at home. Your GP or physiotherapist can advise on a simple exercise routine to follow at home.

## Legal and Financial

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

- If you are working and have to give up your job either temporarily or permanently, check your pension criteria/benefits.
- Find out the best way of managing the patient's financial affairs; a curatorship application may be necessary if the person with dementia has substantial assets.
- Check your own position with regard to the person's home and finances if they go into long term care or die. It differs if you are a spouse, child, friend or caregiver.

## Time to yourself

Make sure that you have some time to yourself to relax or to do something which is just for you.

If the person you are caring for cannot be left alone ask friends or family to give you a break or enquire about services available locally such as home care, day care or residential respite care.



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- Try to put aside a little time each day for yourself, if you can, for example – to have a cup of tea and read the paper, listen to music, do the crossword or to go for a short walk. Don't feel guilty.
  - Try to get out at least once a week to meet a friend, have your hair done, pursue a hobby or continue to take part in church activities. It is important to do something that you find enjoyable and which keeps you in contact with the outside world.
  - Try to take a regular weekend off or a few days break from time to time to recharge your batteries. Find out what support services are available in your area and what they cost. Or ask a family member or friend to stay with the person.

### **Conflicting Demands**

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

Try to make sure that others close to you understand the challenges 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**

Every carer needs support and people with whom they can discuss their feelings. 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 and who really do understand what it is like to be a carer

### **Congratulate yourself.**

You may sometimes feel that you have a thankless task. The person with dementia may not 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 doing your best to improve someone's quality of life.
- For managing to cope with a very difficult situation.
- For becoming more tolerant, flexible and finding new strengths and skill which you did not know you possessed.
- For being there for someone who needs you.
- For what you have learnt along the way.