

Looking after yourself

while looking after someone with dementia



Health and wellness



Most people agree that there is much more to good health than not being sick. Your health and sense of wellbeing are shaped by a whole range of factors and life circumstances. A holistic approach to health, often known as wellness, emphasises the importance of nurturing and balancing all of the different areas of your life. After all, health is not just about the “absence of disease”.

When each of the different aspects of your life is in good shape, you are far more likely to experience good health and a sense of wellbeing. But when one or more areas of your life are under stress or out of whack, it can have a profound effect on how you feel and how you perform. It can also impact on your ability to do all the things you may need to do for yourself and your loved one.

The impact of caring for someone with dementia

Research tells us that taking care of the needs of another person can have a significant impact on your own health and wellbeing. While supporting someone else is often joyful and fulfilling, it can at times also be stressful and exhausting – and it requires a huge personal commitment.

Providing ongoing care and support to a person with dementia is particularly demanding. As a carer you may:

- Have trouble finding time to engage in activities to look after yourself, such as exercising and eating well. You might skip meals, not get enough sleep and miss out on your own medical appointments.
- Feel stressed, anxious or depressed. You might be so absorbed in caring for the person with dementia that you fail to notice the toll it is taking on your own emotional and mental health. You may also feel guilty or question whether you are doing a good job, and you might even doubt how well you are caring because you have no one to discuss your concerns with, or to compare yourself to.
- Not be able to participate in many of your normal activities such as work, other family roles and leisure activities or hobbies. Carers who are working are often forced to make changes to their work schedules and some even have to give up work.
- End up feeling isolated and lonely. Some carers have found that they lose touch with old friends because of their caring responsibilities, and friends and relatives of the person with dementia may stop visiting. Caring takes up significant amounts of time and the financial strains of looking after someone else – such as interruptions to work – put many social activities out of reach.

If you are caring for someone with dementia you may be experiencing one or more of these challenges. It is important to recognise that it is very understandable and quite common for carers to have these experiences.

We’ve put together some ideas to help you look after yourself while caring for someone with dementia.

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How to boost your health and wellness

There are a number of strategies that carers have adopted to help meet the challenges of supporting someone who is living with dementia:

- Be constantly willing to learn, adapt and experiment to find out what works for you and what does not.
- Try to build and maintain good support systems.
- Be proactive in looking out for your own needs.
- Involve support agencies and get additional help as soon as possible / practical. Having extra assistance early on can help maintain your own health and wellbeing.
- Learn as much as you can about dementia by seeking out knowledge and advice.
- Encourage other family members to also learn about dementia.
- Involve family members and share the caring role as much as possible. It will help them understand how involved caring for a person with dementia can be.
- It is vitally important to look after your own health and wellbeing. If you become unwell it may also have consequences for the person you care for. So, remember to:
 - watch what you eat



- engage in physical activities
- seek out advice from health professionals.
- Let your GP know how you are faring. If you need some pointers or could do with additional support, ask how they can help.
- It is important to have some 'me' time. Find ways to spend time apart from the person you are caring for - go for walks and participate in activities such as art, meditation or simply having some alone time.
- Acknowledge the lighter moments and the positives that arise in your role as a carer.

While it can be difficult to find the time and energy to do those things while caring for someone with dementia, there are a number of ways to lighten the load. Where possible carers can use the support of family and friends to lend a hand with a difficult task or enable them to take a well-earned break.

Services that can help

There are a number of programs and services, including respite, carer support groups and counselling. The following services and contacts provide advice and information about supports to assist you in caring for a person with dementia:

- General information about dementia is available through the **National Dementia Helpline** (www.fightdementia.org.au/services/helpline | **1800 100 500**).
- For support and advice about changes in behaviour that are causing stress and concern, carers can receive help from the **Dementia Behaviour Management Advisory Service** (www.dbmas.org.au | **1800 699 799**).
- Local carer support groups can also be a good source of information and advice. **Carers Australia** (www.carersaustralia.com.au | **1800 422 737**) can help you find an appropriate group near you.
- The Commonwealth Government's **Carer Gateway** (www.carergateway.gov.au/dementia | **1800 422 737**) has information on services, such as respite, and tips on looking after your own health and wellness.