

# Looking after yourself

When you're caring for someone with dementia, it can be all too easy to ignore your own needs and to forget that you matter too. But it's much easier to cope if you look after your own health and well-being, and there is lots of support available.

## Your emotional well-being

Every carer needs support and people with whom they can discuss their feelings. You can get different types of support from:

- Friends and family
- Understanding professionals, such as GPs or counsellors
- A local support group where you can chat to others who have had similar experiences and who really understand what it's like. (For details of local support groups, contact your local social services department, the Citizens Advice Bureau, or the Alzheimer's Society).

## Time to yourself

Make sure you have some regular time to relax or do something just for you:

- Put aside some time each day for yourself - to have a cup of tea and read the paper, listen to some music, do the crossword or go for a short walk.
- Get out every week or so to meet a friend, have your hair done, pursue an interest or take part in church activities, for example. It is important to do something that you find enjoyable and that keeps you in contact with the outside world.
- Take regular weekends away or short breaks to recharge your batteries.

**There are plenty of options to help you meet your own needs without compromising the needs of the person you're caring for.**

If the person you are caring for can't be left alone, ask friends or family whether they could pop in for a short time, or whether they could come and stay with the person for a few days. Find out what support services are available in your area, such as home care, day care or respite residential care, and what they cost.

## Your right to local services

Under the Carers and Disabled Children's Act 2000, your local authority is required to provide help for people with dementia, and for you as a carer of someone with dementia. You're entitled to an assessment of your needs, whether or not the person you care for is also being assessed. If the assessment finds that you need any services, the local authority has to provide them. These services might include driving lessons, counselling, or training on how to lift properly. Local authorities may charge for these services, taking your income into account.

Contact the local authority to see if you're eligible for any of their schemes, such as:

- Direct payments, where you receive the cash instead of the services. This means that you can choose and organise services for yourself. (For more information, see our information sheet *Direct payments*).
- Special grants, where the local authority gives you funding that you can use to pay for services to give you a break from caring.
- Vouchers for respite breaks, where the local authority gives you a voucher that you can use to pay for a short term respite break, with the flexibility to choose the timings and the kind of support that you need.

For more information about these and other services, see our information sheet *Community care assessment*.

## Family and friends

Even though you may be coping well now, caring for a person with dementia may gradually become more demanding, both physically and emotionally.

- Try to involve other family members right from the start so that the responsibility doesn't all rest with you. Even if they can't 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 try to accept help from friends or neighbours when they offer it. If you say you can manage, they may not think to ask again.
- Suggest ways that people can help. Maybe ask them to stay with the person for an hour, or to go for a walk with them, so that you can get on with something else.
- Tell people that you value their support. Remind them what a difference it makes when they pop in for a chat or phone regularly to see how you are.
- Explain to your family and close friends how dementia can affect a person's behaviour. Tell them what life is like for you, and for the person you care for. This will account for apparent contradictions in the behaviour of the person, and will help them understand how much you do.

## Your health

- Try to eat a well-balanced diet with at least five portions of fruit and vegetables a day. This will make you feel better and give you more strength and energy.
- Taking regular exercise is vital for your health and will give you more energy. Walk in the fresh air each day if you can, or do some exercises at home. Ask your GP for advice.
- Make sure you get enough sleep. If your sleep is continually disturbed by the person you care for, talk to your doctor, social worker or community psychiatric nurse about it.

- If you have to help the person move, make sure you don't damage your back. Ask your GP to refer you to a community physiotherapist for advice.
- See your GP on a regular basis to check up on your own health. Make sure they're aware of any stress or problems you are experiencing.
- If you start to feel depressed, anxious or stressed, see your GP as soon as possible. There are a number of options available, and these problems are easier to tackle at an early stage.

## Money

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

- If you have to give up work, whether temporarily or permanently, check the position with your pension.
- Check whether you are entitled to financial benefits and, if so, which ones.
- Think about the best way to manage the person's financial affairs when this becomes necessary. This may be through appointeeship or an enduring power of attorney.
- Check your own position in terms of home and finances if the person you are caring for goes into long term care or dies.

For more information on legal and financial issues, see our information sheets *Enduring power of attorney and receivership*, *Financial and legal tips* and *Benefits*.

## Getting support

- Be prepared. Find out about what help you might need, and where you can get it, before you actually need it. That way, when the time comes, you'll know where to turn.
- You'll probably need a lot of different types of help and support, ranging from practical care to give you time off caring to someone to talk to about your feelings and concerns.
- Be persistent. Remember, you have a right to support.

## Conflicting demands

Try to pace yourself - you can only do so much. Many carers feel torn between responsibilities - especially if they are trying to care for children, look after someone who is unwell, or go to work, as well as caring for the person with dementia.

- Find out whether there are any services available for the person with dementia that could relieve you of some of the stress.
- Make sure that others close to you understand what you are going through and tell them that you need their support.

## Congratulate yourself

At times, caring can feel like a thankless task. The person with dementia may no longer seem to appreciate your efforts, and others may be unaware of how much you do. Pat yourself on the back from time to time, for...

- Managing to cope, day in, day out, with a very difficult situation
- Becoming ever more flexible and tolerant and finding new strengths and skills that you did not know you possessed
- Being there for someone who needs you.

## **Carers' advice sheet 523**

Last updated: March 2007

Last reviewed: March 2007