

LOOKING AFTER YOURSELF

If ever a word engendered a host of negative emotional reactions, it is Dementia. Despair, grief, loss, guilt, depression, sadness, bewilderment, anger, resentment, shock.....the list goes on. All these reactions are normal responses, and at various times are felt by both the person with Dementia as well as the carer.

Seeking Support

As a carer you may find yourself trying to juggle your caring duties in between being a spouse, parent, and paid work. You may have to take on roles and duties that have never been your responsibility before. You may find yourself in the unfortunate position of having to care for a relative with whom you have never got on.

Every carer's situation is unique, however they all share common elements. Many carers find it difficult to focus on their own needs in addition to those of the person they are caring for. A lot of carers find that they are time poor and struggle to fit self-care strategies into their daily life. Planning ahead and scheduling your day to include time for yourself can help.

Additionally, some carers experience guilt, as time spent on themselves is time taken away from other pressing needs. However, not taking care of yourself can impact on your own health, which may impact on your ability to care for your loved one. As such, getting help when you need it is necessary in order to be an effective carer and cope in the long term.

Some Strategies for Better Health

Strategies for better health and self-care include:

- **Exercise** – ensure you are fitting physical activities into your life. Exercise can help improve your current health, decrease your risk of developing other health concerns, as well as help to relieve stress.
- **Activities and Hobbies** – making time for activities that you enjoy can help your mental wellbeing. Whatever it is you enjoy, making sure you still get the chance to enjoy your own hobbies and have “me” time is important.
- **Diet** – eating healthy and regular meals can have great benefits to your long term health and also to your daily energy levels. Eating fresh fruit and vegetables can decrease our stress levels and promote a stronger immune system.
- **Sleep** – making sure you are getting enough sleep and downtime should be a priority. This can sometimes be difficult with night-time Dementia behaviours, but carer stress can quickly increase when fatigued and long-term sleep disturbances can lead to exhaustion.
- **Social** – spending time with friends and family can relieve a huge amount of stress. Even if it is just a quick telephone call, communicating and sharing your experience can be a stress buster.

- **Seek support** – it is advisable to seek support as early as possible. The positive value of talking to people who have experienced similar situations can be priceless.
- **Taking a break** – organise to have regular breaks, either informally with the support of family and friends, or via a local community respite centre. Taking breaks is important to allow yourself to rest and recuperate.

Coping with Stress

Developing effective ways to deal with the emotional upheaval associated with Dementia is a crucial part of managing the disease process and ensuring the wellbeing of all concerned. Although we can often be self-critical when we cry, you need to allow yourself to do so when necessary. Crying is the body's natural way of relieving emotional stress.

The following outlines some effective ways of coping with stress. None of the suggestions require special training or equipment and most can be done anywhere, anytime.

Breathing exercises

Sit up straight and comfortable in a supporting chair (alternatively, lie on your back). Take a slow deep breath through your mouth so you can see your stomach stretch out. Breathe out slowly through the mouth. Take ten breaths and repeat the entire process as many times during the day as you like.

Walking

The most natural, relaxing, and effective exercise possible.

Swimming and floating in a pool

This is another natural way of relaxing. Focus on the water around your body and face whilst breathing deeply.

Sitting in a quiet area

Try simply sitting in the sunshine, in a garden or by the water. A little warm sunshine on the back, the smell of fresh flowers, the sound of leaves rustling in a gentle breeze or the sound of water lapping on the shore, all contribute to an immediate sense of mental relaxation.

Gentle rocking in a rocking chair

Rocking is an extremely soothing motion and aids in maintaining a sense of balance.

Massage

Touch can be extremely soothing. Gentle stroking of the hands and feet may be all that is needed to generate an overall feeling of relaxation.

Listening to soft, relaxing music

Choose music that you enjoy. It is a powerful tool that will very quickly change your mood and lift the spirit.

Gentle stretching exercises

Our bodies by nature are designed to move. Try:

- Stretching your arms above your head as high as you can and wiggle the fingers.
- Roll your shoulders in gentle circles.
- Turn your head from side to side slowly – feel the stretch.

- While sitting, stretch your legs in front of you and point your toes away from you and then back towards your head. Roll your ankles around in gentle circles.

Help and assistance is available. For further information please contact Alzheimer's Queensland Advice Line on 1800 639 331.