

Coping with Stress

THIS FACT SHEET helps carers to recognise the symptoms of stress and provides strategies on how to avoid and manage stress. It discusses ways in which carers need to look after themselves.

Carers and Stress

We all encounter stress as part of our daily living. While a certain amount acts as a healthy, motivating force, too much stress over a prolonged period leads to physical and emotional exhaustion. Carers are very vulnerable to stress. They often report feeling utterly overwhelmed. Looking after someone day-in and day-out can be thankless, lonely, exhausting work, with no end in sight. Many carers also feel great sadness at the loss of their loved one's capabilities and let down by friends and family who don't want to be involved.

Too close for comfort: Caring for someone full-time or part-time is an intense experience that places strain on close relationships. If the person you are caring for is a partner or parent, it often means you have also lost your main source of emotional support and companionship.

It can also upset the normal roles we play in life. For example, a partner may need to take on many new roles such as cooking, managing finances and looking after the children. It's also quite an adjustment to feel comfortable "parenting" a once formidable mother or father who has become frail.

Add to this your family member's pain and frustration with their illness, which can cause irritability, even hostility, and you feel a bit like a punching bag. It's only natural to feel hurt when aggression is directed at you, the only person around to hear it.

Financial strain: Illness may also bring extra expense at a time when the family has less income, which adds to the tension.

The rewards: Yet, even under the most difficult conditions, carers speak of shared feelings of love and affection, of their personal satisfaction, of small successes, of mutual pleasures and appreciation, and cherished moments of happiness and closeness. Sometimes, helpers appear from the most unexpected corners and become wonderful friends.

Respect your needs: You need to make sure that you don't overcommit yourself or work too hard for too long - for your own sake, as well as the sake of the person you care for. Otherwise, who is going to care for you? You must learn to respect and meet your own needs. It's the only way to avoid breakdown or burnout.

Symptoms

Stress triggers a physical reaction in the body and prolonged stress weakens the immune system, making us less resistant to illness. When the body is placed in a state of high energy, all that energy needs to go somewhere. You might experience:

- > Short-temperedness and irritability.
- > Muscle tension, causing headaches.
- > Shallow breathing - the brain/body cannot function at its best with reduced oxygen intake.
- > Jumpiness or overactivity - unable to sit still or eat slowly, having scattered thoughts.
- > Constant fatigue, even after sleep, accompanied by foggy thinking.
- > Physical symptoms - stomach aches, indigestion.
- > Difficulty sleeping.

- > Increased heart rate, blood pressure, blood-sugar levels and palpitations.
- > Emotional symptoms – anxiety, overemotional responses, feeling trapped, crying easily, trembling, depression

Coping Strategies

Almost all carers experience some level of these symptoms and often feel guilty about not coping. But ignoring your own health and needs only makes matters worse.

Share your feelings: It is much easier to see a problem clearly and find a new way of dealing with it when you share the load. Find someone who can share your feelings, fears, frustrations and joys – a family member who understands, a friend or another carer.

Support groups: Consider joining a carers' support group where you can talk to others in similar situations and find out how they manage. It can be a great relief just talking with someone who understands what you are going through. You may also gain some useful, down-to-earth strategies. Call Carer's Australia (Vic) for support group details.

Counselling: A few sessions with a counsellor or psychologist may also be helpful, particularly if you are feeling overwhelmed or depressed about your situation. Ask for a referral from your doctor, contact your local council for services in your area or try the Australian Psychological Society's telephone referral service:

Telephone (03) 8662 3300 or free call 1800 333 497.

Laugh: Laughter is a tremendous stress release. Try not to take insults personally. Let yourself see the funny side and the absurdity in situations. A good belly-laugh performs magic on the mind and body.

Time off: You cannot care for someone 24 hours-a-day, seven days-a-week without serious consequences to your health. Plan time to yourself every day – at least thirty minutes – perhaps when the person you are caring for is watching TV or asleep or when someone else is home. Sit down

with a drink and read a magazine. Don't fill the time with housework.

You have probably forgotten what it's like having a weekend off. You need at least two half-days off a week. Plan a regular outing with a friend, attend a class or join a group.

Many councils offer services to look after a person in their own home and have day programs, if the person is well enough to attend. Have you asked family members or friends if they can help? They may be happy to help some of the time.

Don't try to do everything. Do the things that really matter and forget about the rest. Is all the housework you do really important? Could someone else manage the garden? Make lists of the most important things to be done.

Respite care: Respite care allows you to have a holiday to renew yourself physically and mentally. Respite care services recommend that you have at least two consecutive weeks in a break to allow yourself time to relax fully and gain maximum benefit. Fact Sheet 15: Respite and Residential Care tells you how to access these services.

Ask for help: Don't battle on alone. With support, you'll get some rest, be able to think more clearly and be in a better position to cope. You'll feel better about yourself and you'll be better able to go on caring.

Call your local council to find out what services are available in your community. Councils and local hospitals employ social workers who are a great source of support and information, as are Carers Australia (Vic) and your condition-specific support organisation, who understand your position well. Talk to your local doctor about stress management or call the Australian Psychological Society for a psychologist in your area. (See Contacts below) Don't forget to ask friends and acquaintances. People are often happy to help on a limited basis. Or ring a member of your carer support group.

If things suddenly become too much, call a crisis support service:

Lifeline: 13 1114

Mensline: 1300 789 978

Suicide Line: 1300 651 251

Commonwealth Carer Respite Centre:
1800 059 059

Caring for Yourself

Rule number one: Try not to put unrealistic demands on yourself. It is only natural that you will feel grumpy, tired and frustrated at times. Don't give yourself a hard time. No one is perfect. Just look at what you are achieving – you are doing an invaluable job.

Vitality = diet: Make sure that you eat well. Good nutrition gives us our health, our ability to cope and our energy. Choose a diet with lots of fresh fruit and vegetables, grains and legumes (beans, nuts, seeds), protein (meat, fish, eggs) and plenty of good fats (avocado, olive oil, butter, coconut milk). Try to avoid processed foods as much as possible.

Relaxation therapy: Research proves that relaxation therapies (tapes, classes, do-it-yourself techniques in books) and meditation dramatically reduce stress. This can be as simple as sitting in a park or really engaging with nature on a walk. A relaxation tape is available free from the Carers' Association. Many other tapes and books are available commercially.

Exercise: It simply is one of the best ways to reduce stress and it doesn't have to take long. Get some exercise each day. Walk around the block or to the shops or along the beach. Take up exercise you can do at home like yoga or tai chi. Try a new activity, like bowls or golf.

Indulge yourself: Pamper yourself within your budget. Go to the hairdresser, buy new clothes, go to a film, have a massage or sit in the sun with a good book.

Keep up social contacts: It's easy to lose social contacts but it's very important to keep up your own identity, separate from your caring role. Make sure

you do things that you are passionate about: films, reading, eating out.

Organise to see friends over a coffee and speak regularly with them over the phone. As simple as it seems, having stimulating conversations with people about a wide variety of topics temporarily takes your mind away from your role as a carer. It also gives you something to talk about together with your loved one.

Zzzzz: Try to get enough sleep. If your nights are interrupted, can you nap during the day? Can family members help, even one night a week? A relaxing activity before bed is an excellent idea.

Contacts

For more information, you might also contact your condition-specific support organisation (see Contacts page7).

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Notes: