

TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF: STRATEGIES

Excessive stress is a real health hazard that can lead to burnout and health problems. For example, stress has been known to negatively affect our immune systems.

Properly managing stress while you are caring for a person with dementia can improve your quality of life and allow you to be more effective as a caregiver. Your health is important, for your own well-being and for the person with dementia.

Tips for Reducing Stress

Being a caregiver is hard work, and you need to be healthy and happy in order to manage your role. Keep in mind that it is possible to take care of yourself without compromising the needs of the person you are caring for. Below are some suggested strategies for maintaining your health and well-being.

Stay healthy

- The happiest people are usually the healthiest, and those who eat well and exercise tend to be better equipped to handle stress.
- Make it a point to develop a healthy diet and a regular exercise schedule to ensure that you maintain a good quality of life.
- Make sure you get enough sleep.
- See your doctor on a regular basis to check up on your own health. Make sure they are aware of any stress or problems you are experiencing.

Get emotional support

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

- friends and family
- caregiver support groups - where you can share with others who have had similar experiences
- online discussion forums (chat rooms) - these can be a helpful source of support and practical suggestions
- understanding professionals, such as your doctor or a counsellor

Take time for yourself

Make sure that you have some time to relax or to do something just for yourself every day. As a caregiver, you have the right to follow your own interests outside of your caregiving role. In fact, it is essential that you do.

- Put aside some time each day for yourself: have a cup of tea, read the paper, listen to music, do the crossword puzzle or go for a short walk.
- Make a point to get out of the house, even if it is only for half an hour.
- Get out every week or so to meet a friend, to pursue an interest or to take part in activities that you enjoy.
- Take regular weekends away or short breaks to recharge your batteries.

Get help from friends and family

- Provide your friends and family with information about dementia. This will help them to understand the person's behaviour and your need for help.
- Try to accept help from friends or neighbours when they offer it. If you decline, they may not think to ask again.
- Try to involve other family members right from the start so that the responsibility doesn't rest entirely 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.
- Prepare a list of things that need doing. The list might include errands, yard work, or a visit with your loved one. Let the "helper" choose what he/she would like to do.
- Be prepared for hesitance or refusal. Try not to take it personally when your requests are turned down. The person is turning down the task, not you. A person who refuses today may be happy to help at another time.
- Let people know that you value their support.

Congratulate yourself

At times, caregiving 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 and day out, with a very difficult situation.
- for becoming ever more flexible and tolerant, and finding new strengths and skills that you did not know you possessed.
- for being there for someone who needs you.

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Stress Reduction Techniques

Everyone has different ways to manage stress. Managing stress can improve your well-being and positively impact your caring role. It can be useful to learn some effective ways to deal with stress.

- **Learn about the disease.** Knowing as much as you can about the disease and care strategies will prepare you for the dementia journey.
- **Be realistic...about the disease.** It is important to be realistic about the disease and how it will affect the person over time. Once you are realistic, it will be easier for you to adjust your expectations.
- **Be realistic...about yourself.** You need to be realistic about how much you can do. What do you value the most? A walk with the person you are caring for, time by yourself, or a tidy house? There is no "right" answer; only you know what matters most and how much you can do.
- **Accept your feelings.** When caring for a person with dementia, you will have many mixed feelings. In a single day, you may feel contented, angry, guilty, happy, sad, embarrassed, afraid, and helpless. These feelings may be confusing. But they are normal. Recognize that you are doing your best.
- **Be positive.** Your attitude makes a difference in the way you feel. Try to look at the positive side of things. Focus on what you or the person with dementia can do, as opposed to what you cannot do.
- **Set goals.** Setting goals or deciding what you would like to accomplish in the next two to six months is an important tool for taking care of yourself. Once you've set a goal, ask yourself, "What steps do I take to reach my goal?" Make an action plan by deciding which step you will take first, and when.
- **Look for humour.** While dementia is serious, you may find certain situations have a bright side. Maintaining a sense of humour is a good coping strategy.
- **Try relaxation methods.** Listen to soft music, do visualization exercises, write your thoughts in a journal, take a quiet bath, meditate... whatever works for you.

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