

Becoming a carer affects all of us in different ways. Whether we felt we had a choice about it or were thrown into it because of circumstances, there is no doubt that caring can be difficult at times. There is not usually any prior training so most people muddle through as best they can, learning as they go along. You may love the person you care for but the daily responsibility of attending to their needs may mean that your own needs are often neglected. Although it can be rewarding caring can also feel frustrating and stressful.

Carers and relationships

Carers often say that one of the most difficult things to deal with is accepting that their relationship with the person they care for has changed. Perhaps your partner can no longer take on the responsibility of managing the household finances and you have had to take over or your child's recently diagnosed disability has meant that you are now not only their parent but their nurse and advocate as well. You may also discover that relationships with family, friends and others have changed and not always in ways you could have imagined.

Dealing with feelings

If you feel sad, anxious or angry that things have changed then it is important for you to allow yourself to have those feelings rather than to ignore them. Although you may want to hide them from others, they are your feelings and the longer you cover them up, the harder it can be to manage them. Hidden feelings also have a nasty habit of coming out at the wrong moments!

Allowing yourself to cry or writing about how angry you feel can be a good way of releasing tension. Some feelings may be easier to express than others. You can often end up feeling disloyal or guilty if you allow yourself to feel happy and get pleasure from life, particularly if the person you care for is struggling. It's not just difficult feelings that we bottle up, but good ones too.

Communication

The best way to tackle any kind of change in our lives, and our thoughts and feelings about it, is to talk. Although this may sound simple, in practice it can be very difficult

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to do. We worry that we may be opening a can of worms, that other people might get upset or angry and it will make things worse. It can be hard enough trying to get our views across to professionals, never mind telling someone you love that sometimes you find it hard to care for them.

If we do not talk we run the risk of causing ourselves more stress, whereas when we do speak we can be surprised about how it has actually helped the relationship. If you can be open and honest you may find that it can help the other person say what is on their mind, and then there is the possibility of moving forward together.

Moving on and letting go

Moving forward, however, first involves letting something go, the old life that you had before you became a carer and maybe some of your hopes and dreams for the future. Sometimes we feel hopeless and stuck, not believing that anything will ever change for the better. We need to acknowledge what we have lost and accept that, before we can think to the future and begin to allow ourselves to create new plans.

The Chinese symbol for change has two meanings crisis and opportunity. It is human nature to focus on the crisis and not see the new opportunities that are there if we are willing to risk looking.

"When my husband had the stroke it felt like the end of the world, my world, but now I see that giving up work was good for me. I had the time to think about trying some voluntary work, just for a few hours."

Ways of coping

Taking time out

Remember when you had all the time in the world to meet people, go to the cinema, or do whatever it was you used to enjoy doing? Leisure time is often the first thing that disappears for carers, and the last thing they have time for, and yet it is one of the best stress relievers. If possible try to take some 'time out' each day, even if it's just for twenty minutes. Even better think about stealing a few hours away if you can when your partner or child is in daycare or at school and do something that will help you feel relaxed.

Exercise

Getting some regular exercise helps our bodies get rid of excess stress energy, otherwise we may find that we are pacing about, tapping our hands and feet. Try swimming, a fitness class or even a short walk. It's important to do something you actually enjoy or it will become yet another chore.

Counselling

Many people find that talking to someone who is not a friend or family member, in confidence, is an opportunity to explore their thoughts and feelings about life as a carer, how they deal with things now and to consider how they may want to deal with things in a different way.

The counsellor will not tell you what to do or judge you. Counselling sessions usually last for about an hour at the same time each week. You can go either for a few sessions or for a longer period, depending on what you would like to talk about. There are various counselling services available, based in voluntary agencies and the private sector. Some services are free and others may operate a sliding scale depending on your income. Some counsellors also work independently. When making your choice you may want to ask about what training and experience the counsellor has had, how they work and if notes are kept. Only you can decide if a particular counsellor is right for you.

"It was good to have someone to really listen to me. Friends or relatives only listen for a short while which is understandable in a way as everyone has their own problems."

Taking part in groups

Joining a local carers' support group can be a way of getting both practical and emotional support. Other carers are often a great source of knowledge and expertise, no matter what you are struggling with there will usually be someone who has been through the same thing and can understand how you feel.

"Time out for myself, sharing experience and gaining strength."

Sleep

Most of us need around 7 to 8 hours sleep a night, less as we get older. If your sleep is often disturbed think about having a 5 to 20 minute catnap during the day to recharge your batteries. But remember that a nap of more than 30 minutes can make you feel groggy so don't sleep too long!

Think about your diet

If we are giving our bodies plenty of fuel in the form of nourishing food and drink (including fresh fruit and vegetables) and monitoring our caffeine and alcohol intake then generally we find that our 'engine' will run better. The healthier we are, the more easily we can cope with the demands of caring.

Remember to breathe!

A simple technique to use when things are getting on top of you is to focus on your breath. Take three slow, deep breaths in through your nose and out through your mouth. Practice this next time you are in a queue or on a bus and notice the calming effect it has.