

Looking after your emotional health as a family carer



Caring for someone with dementia is very rewarding, but it can also be emotional, overwhelming, frustrating, and exhausting at times.

By identifying emotional triggers and understanding your responses, you can begin to notice patterns that affect your wellbeing and caregiving experience.

Here are some practical things you can do to look after your emotional wellbeing:

- **Establish routines:** Consistency helps reduce confusion and anxiety for both you and the person you care for.
- **Take breaks:** Even short respites from your caring role – for example to do a hobby you enjoy — can prevent burnout.
- **Ask for help** from friends, family, or support services.
- **Notice your own needs:** Your wellbeing matters. Watch for signs of stress, fatigue, or emotional strain.
- **Celebrate small wins:** A calm moment, a shared smile, or a completed task is worth acknowledging.
- **Stay connected:** Talk to other carers or join a support group to reduce isolation.

Reflection and practical action can help you to navigate difficult moments with greater resilience and empathy. This can be emotionally healthy for yourself and the person you care for.



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Managing stress, guilt and strong emotions

Coping with strong emotions

Carers often experience a wide range of emotions, from anxiety and frustration to joy. Each person and each experience is unique, and it's okay to feel differently than others.

Your emotions influence your interactions. Even if you try to hide them, your emotions may show through body language, tone, and behaviour — and can sometimes affect the person with dementia.

Your emotions might affect:

**your body
language**

**the way
you speak**

**how you
interact**

**your approach in
supporting others**

This can create a cycle where your stress affects their behaviour, making your relationship more difficult, and situations harder.

Feeling guilty

Guilt is a common feeling among carers, especially during difficult decisions or emotional moments. Common causes for feelings of guilt include:

- a diagnosis of dementia
- making care decisions
- feeling unable to provide comfort
- using white lies to reassure
- feeling irritated or angry
- changes in your relationship
- wanting to escape
- tension or disagreements.

Questions to reflect on that can help you manage feelings of guilt

- Is this a fact, or just my opinion?
- What assumptions am I making?
- What evidence supports or disputes my thinking?
- Am I accepting responsibility for something beyond my control?
- What advice would I give to a friend in this situation?
- How will I feel about this in one week / one month / one year?
- What can I do to care for myself now?

Carers may often feel resentful of the need to be a carer or the way the person's condition has affected their life. Support groups can be helpful for you to recognise that you're not alone and connect with others who share similar feelings and difficulties.

Take note

What emotions do you feel right now?

Take note

Reflecting questions.

Managing stress

Caring for someone with dementia can be stressful. Understanding stress and how to manage it can improve your ability to cope and your emotional wellbeing.

Signs of stress include:

- increased heart rate or body temperature
- tensing up
- loss of appetite or eating more than usual
- butterflies in the tummy
- needing to go to the toilet
- difficulty sleeping.

Stress builds gradually and peaks, making it hard to think clearly, and recovery can take time.

Tips to manage stress

- **Breathing techniques:** Help build resilience and calm.
- **Mindfulness:** Notice and manage overwhelming thoughts and emotions.
- **Relaxation:** Taking time out can help you to cope and adapt.
- **Share your feelings:** Talk to friends, family, or other carers who understand your experience.
- **Counselling:** Speaking with a professional can help you process emotions.
- **Physical wellbeing and thoughts:** Exercise, gentle movement, and eating a balanced diet can all help with managing stress.

Take note

What are your stress triggers?

Take note

Which stress management methods work for you?

Reflect

Sketch, doodle or take notes.

Reflecting on your thoughts, feelings, and behaviour

Name the emotion

- I am feeling... (e.g. sad, angry, fearful, frustrated):
- This feeling makes me want to... (e.g. cry, shout, go quiet, feel numb):

Identify the cause

- I was... (location or situation):
- I noticed... (e.g. who I was with, body language, what I said/did):

Recognise feelings and thoughts

- When I felt... I... (action/behaviour):
- The thoughts that came to my mind were...

Practice self-compassion

- Were my feelings, thoughts, and behaviours appropriate for the situation?
- Could I control this? If it happened again, would I respond differently?
- Remember that everybody has individual feelings and reactions, and there is no 'one way' to feel.

Reflect

Making decisions

Making decisions can become increasingly difficult for carers of people living with dementia — especially when decisions were previously worked out together and the responsibility shared.

Added pressure to 'do the right thing' also adds to the stress and you may try to avoid or put off making decisions. As time goes on, you may start to lose confidence in your decision making, or find it more difficult to make a decision.

Here's some tips to help you to manage the stress of making decisions:

- **Ease the sense of overwhelm** by looking after yourself. Pausing to think clearly, go for a walk, sit in the garden, do some yoga or sleep on it.
- **Journalling:** Writing down your thoughts can help clarify your motivations and concerns.
- **Write down the pros and cons of the decision** on a piece of paper and work through them. Give them a priority rating 1-10 (1 not important to 10 important/ essential to you in your life).
- **Ask yourself further questions** such as:
 - Is this a doable option?
 - What's stopping me from...?
 - Are there alternatives?
 - What's worked in the past?
 - Do I have enough information to decide?
 - What would help me?
 - Is it in my control?
- **Speak to trusted people** about how you feel, and ask for advice. You may wish to speak to family, friends or trained professionals like counsellors or coaches.
- **Imagine having decided**, and notice how you feel about it. Does it feel right?

Take note

What are your thoughts?

Take note

Note your answers to the questions

Why being mindful matters in decision making

Being mindful means recognising and noticing your thoughts and feelings. It can help you to manage stress, deal with difficult feelings, and make decisions.

Being mindful is an act of caring for yourself. It can help you to be more self-aware, and this awareness can allow you to pause and reflect before making choices, rather than reacting impulsively.

Recognising your feelings enables you to manage them more effectively. For example, noticing frustration or anxiety can help you avoid making decisions driven by stress or fear.

Mindfulness reduces mental clutter, allowing you to concentrate on what truly matters. This leads to more thoughtful, intentional decisions.

You are not alone. Support is available, and your wellbeing matters just as much as the person you care for.

Take note

What actions will you take?

Reflect



Visit skillsforcare.org.uk/dementia to download more dementia resources and find support on dementia.