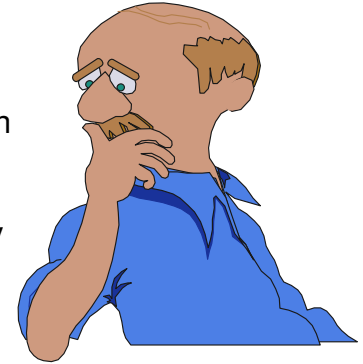


# EXPLORING *FEELINGS* HELPS CAREGIVERS COPE

A person with Alzheimer's disease usually functions best in the familiar setting of his or her home. For this reason, many families work very hard to provide home-based care for the person with Alzheimer's for as long as possible. Yet, living with someone suffering from this disease may cause tremendous disruption and affect the lifestyles of the entire family. Witnessing the personality changes and decreasing functional capacities of a loved one may also be very distressing.



If you are a caregiver, it is extremely important for you to come to terms with the many painful feelings you may experience daily. To improve your ability to cope with your role as caregiver, let's explore some of these feelings.

## **ANGER**

As a caregiver, you may feel angry with your family member with Alzheimer's disease, or at your "unfair" situation. There is nothing wrong with your anger- it is a very natural emotion. Do not deny yourself these feelings. Normally, you release anger by expressing it to the person you are angry with. However, the person with Alzheimer's may not understand why you are angry, so expressing your anger may not help; in fact, it may even create more problems.

Don't keep anger bottled up inside of you. Although you cannot release your anger by expressing it to the source, you can look for other ways to express it. Share your feelings with other caregiver, family, or friends. Writing your feelings down also may provide some relief. Keep in mind that if your anger becomes uncontrollable you should seek professional counseling to help you work through your feelings.

## **TRAPPED...TIED DOWN...ISOLATED**

If you have raised young children, you may know what it is like to feel trapped, tied down, or isolated. Parents often wonder if they will ever be able to take a break and leave their child for even a few minutes; as the caregiver of someone with Alzheimer's, you may experience similar emotions.

Keeping the proper perspective in dealing with these feelings may help. Look for ways to alleviate isolation. Can you invite someone over to keep you company? If having company agitates the person with Alzheimer's, try having friends over during naptime or using the telephone to keep in touch. Even with friends' visits and phone calls, you still may feel the need to "get away" from time to time. Find someone to stay with the family member, or trade off respite care with another caregiver to relative so you can go to a movie or take a walk. Although you may feel "obligated" to shoulder the entire responsibility for care giving, make a point of looking for opportunities to take a break from your routine.

## **CHEATED**

Feeling cheated is an especially prevalent emotion among middle-aged caregivers that have been looking forward to having some free time. The children have left home, and you and your spouse are free to get reacquainted. If one of your parents, or even your spouse, suddenly must rely on you for care, you may feel cheated out of the "retirement years" you have worked so hard for.

Again, discussing your feelings openly with other caregivers, family members, or professional counselors may help you keep your emotions in check. Be creative in finding ways to regain some of those "free hours." Find someone who can stay with your loved one for a few hours, trade off respite care with other couples or siblings, or ask your children to help out if they are old enough.

## **GRIEF**

We all experience grief when we lose someone or something we care about. Typically, we grieve the loss of family members or friends, our health or home, our social or economic status, or anything else we value.

Grief can be a puzzling emotion. You may wonder, "Why am I feeling grief when my parent/spouse is still alive?" The answer is that you "miss" your loved one, who probably no longer acts like the person you have known and loved for so long. Consequently, you may be grieving the loss of the intimacy and companionship that the two of you shared.

## **GUILT**

This emotion is often the strongest feeling experienced by the caregiver. You may feel guilty that you aren't doing enough for your family member with Alzheimer's disease. You may feel guilty about things you said, did, or thought; or about things you left unsaid or undone. Don't assume that loved ones with Alzheimer's disease are incapable of understanding what you are saying. Even if they don't completely understand your words, they may still understand the feelings you are trying to express. You also may feel guilty for experiencing some of the previously discussed emotions, especially anger. Remember- don't feel guilty about your feelings- they are normal and acceptable. Give yourself credit for your efforts to cope and recognize that you are doing the very best you can.

## **BURN OUT... STRESS**

Caregivers shoulder a great deal of responsibility and perform a very difficult job. As a caregiver, remember that maintaining your own mental and physical health first is vitally important; ultimately, it will result in better care for your family member. To take better care of yourself, learn to recognize some of the signs of stress: personal health problems like headaches or stomachaches, inability to solve problems, decreased ability to cope with the care demands of your family member with Alzheimer's.

Courtesy of Western and Central Washington  
Alzheimer's Association  
Revised Fall 2003