



## Chapter 1

take  
**good care**  
of yourself



**a**s a caregiver, you may find yourself with so many responsibilities that you neglect your own well-being. But maintaining your own good health is important to your success as a caregiver. The best thing you can do for the person with Alzheimer's disease is to stay physically and emotionally strong by taking good care of yourself.

## experience the moment

It's important to focus on the good things that come from providing care for someone with Alzheimer's disease. There will be changes in your relationship with the person; however, it can still be rich and fulfilling.

Spend time together in ways that bring you closer and help you relate. You might learn things about the person you didn't know before, which can help you plan better for daily care and for activities you can enjoy together.

## watch for signs of stress and how to cope

Providing care for someone with Alzheimer's can be stressful; Alzheimer caregivers report that they frequently experience high levels of stress. Too much stress can be damaging to both a caregiver and to the person with Alzheimer's.

A 2007 study by Evercare® reported that the stress from providing care for a loved one with a disease takes a big toll on the caregiver's health. In fact, two-thirds of the caregivers surveyed said that they had increased anxiety or stress as a result of their caregiving responsibilities. If you experience signs of stress on a regular basis, consult your doctor. Ignoring them can cause your physical and mental health to decline.



Additional study findings:

- Nearly half (49 percent) of caregivers polled reported difficulty sleeping.
- Nearly half (48 percent) used vacation or sick days at work in order to provide care.
- A fourth (26 percent) reported that they had experienced new or worsening health problems as a result of caregiving.
- More than one-third (37 percent) cut back on work hours or quit work entirely.

## Symptoms of caregiver stress

- Denial
- Anger
- Social withdrawal
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Exhaustion
- Sleeplessness
- Irritability
- Lack of concentration
- Problems with physical health

## Tips for dealing with stress

Here are some tips on keeping your stress levels as low as possible:

- **Know what resources are available.** Adult day care, in-home assistance, visiting nurses and Meals-on-Wheels are just some of the services that can help you. Find out what's available in your community.
- **Become an educated caregiver.** As the disease progresses, new caregiving skills will become necessary. The Alzheimer's Association and [www.alz.org](http://www.alz.org) can provide you with information and resources on all aspects of the disease.
- **Get help.** You are not failing as a caregiver by asking others for assistance. Seek the support of family, friends and community resources.
- **Take care of yourself.** Watch your diet, exercise and get plenty of rest. Make time for friends and family. Take advantage of respite care options so you can take a break once in a while.
- **Manage your stress level.** If you experience any of the symptoms of caregiver stress, try relaxation techniques that work for you and consult your doctor to learn if there's anything further you can do.
- **Accept changes as they occur.** People with Alzheimer's will change, and so will their daily needs. They often require care beyond what you can provide – and it's important that you don't try to do everything yourself.
- **Make legal and financial plans.** At the beginning of your duties as a caregiver, consult an attorney to discuss legal, financial and care issues. Whenever possible, involve the person with Alzheimer's and family members.
- **Be realistic.** Many of the behaviors that occur are beyond your control and the control of the person with Alzheimer's. You will need to find time alone or with supportive friends to grieve and be angry.
- **Give yourself credit, not guilt.** You are doing the best you can. Don't feel guilty because you can't do more. The person with Alzheimer's needs you, and you are there.



## LEARN MORE

Visit [www.alz.org/stresscheck](http://www.alz.org/stresscheck) to take our Caregiver Stress Check. Answer a series of simple questions to define your caregiving experience and receive a customized list of resources to help you cope.

## being a healthy caregiver

You may be so overwhelmed by taking care of your loved one that you have neglected your own well-being. If you find yourself without the time to take care of your own needs, you may be putting yourself and your health at risk.

Be sure to visit your physician regularly, and listen to what your body is telling you. Any exhaustion, stress, sleeplessness or changes in appetite or behavior should be taken seriously. Ignoring these symptoms can cause your physical and mental health to decline.

A recent Alzheimer's Association study shows that almost one-third of Alzheimer caregivers get less exercise than they did before taking on caregiving duties. It's important to keep your mind and body in shape.

## GET MOVING

Getting enough exercise is important for you and your loved one. You can get a quick workout and involve the person with dementia at the same time. There are plenty of ways you can both be active:

- Take a walk together outside to enjoy the fresh air
- Go to your favorite mall and take a stroll indoors
- Do seated exercises at home
- Dance together to favorite music
- Garden or do other routine activities that you both enjoy

## respite care

It's normal to sometimes feel like you need a break from your caregiving duties. Respite care can provide such a break by temporarily asking another individual or paid service provider to assume your caregiving duties. It's a good way for you to take some time for yourself while your loved one gets an opportunity to be in a new environment and interact with someone else.



### LEARN MORE

For additional information about respite care, see page 80 of this guide or contact the Alzheimer's Association for a copy of "Respite Care Guide: Finding what's right for you."

Respite care can provide you with:

- A chance to spend time with other friends and family, or to just relax
- Time to take care of errands such as shopping, exercising, getting a haircut or going to the doctor
- Comfort and peace of mind knowing that the person with dementia is spending time with another caring individual

## changing roles and relationships

Changes in relationships with the person with Alzheimer's, family members and friends are quite normal, yet can be difficult to understand. You may find yourself taking on a new role in your relationship as the person's memory declines. He or she may no longer be able to perform certain tasks, such as balancing a checkbook, doing taxes, handling financial and legal matters or doing certain household chores. Making important decisions on your own may feel overwhelming.

To be prepared for this role, you may need to turn to family, friends, professionals or community resources for assistance.

You may feel socially isolated because your family and friends have pulled back from your relationship or you have little time to spend with them. Your family and friends may hesitate to spend time with you and the person with Alzheimer's disease because they worry about not knowing what to do or say.

Take the initiative to contact family and friends and explain that while Alzheimer's disease has changed your lives in some ways, you value their friendship and support. It's important that you have a strong support network as you provide care for your loved one.