

Make space for yourself



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Looking after yourself is an essential part of caring well – for both your loved one and yourself

Words Emma Green

Caring for someone with dementia is probably one of the most demanding roles a person can take on. Many caregivers do not plan for this role, and very few are prepared for how all-consuming it can become. Many carers put their own needs aside for months or even years, telling themselves that they will rest later once things are easier. Often, that time never comes.

Dementia doesn't follow a predictable path, and for many caregivers, there is little opportunity to switch off. Even when things seem relatively calm, many carers feel unable to fully relax as

they're always listening out, watching and anticipating.

Over time, this constant responsibility can take a serious toll on physical health, mental wellbeing and quality of life. One study found that 30-40% of dementia caregivers experience depression and stress at clinically significant levels, with the risk increasing as the person's functional needs grow. Other research has found that chronic stress and sleep disturbances in dementia caregivers have been linked to metabolic syndrome (a cluster of conditions that increase the risk of heart disease, diabetes and stroke), along with



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weakened immunity. Ironically, these are all recognised risk factors themselves for cognitive decline and dementia. These poor health outcomes are not just due to the intense and relentless nature of caring for someone with dementia, but also because caregivers tend to neglect their own healthcare, which can further compound long-term health risks.

Without support, breaks and space to recharge, even the most devoted carer can become overwhelmed or unwell - and it is certainly in no one's best interest for you to burn yourself to the ground. The following are some ways to take care of yourself when your time, energy and priorities are wrapped up in caring for others.

Self-care for caregivers

We often scoff at the concept of self-care, but it isn't just about indulging in luxury spa days or taking long bubble baths; it's about meeting your basic needs. 'Self-care for caregivers needs to be realistic,' explains Ewelina Wiesner, founder of Silverstars Care, a home care company based in Dorset and Somerset that provides specialised dementia care. 'Physically, this can mean eating regular meals, drinking enough water and moving your body gently when possible. Mentally, it helps to acknowledge that caring is demanding and that struggling does not mean you are failing. Talking openly with someone you

trust, keeping a simple journal or accessing support groups can reduce feelings of isolation.'

Sometimes it can feel as if our loved one's illness takes centre stage and dominates every aspect of our lives. Our caregiving duties can also shrink our world beyond all recognition. 'Maintaining a sense of identity beyond caring is important,' says Ewelina. 'You are still a person with interests, thoughts and emotions, not just a caregiver. Even brief routines that are just for you can help maintain that connection.' This might involve pursuing a hobby, engaging in social or community events or taking time for activities that bring you meaning or enjoyment. 'Staying connected does not have to mean large commitments,' adds Ewelina. 'Small, regular moments matter. This might be a short phone call with a friend, listening to a favourite podcast, or stepping outside for ten minutes of fresh air.'

For some carers, though, leaving the house can seem like an impossibility,

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and so, in this case, self-care begins with finding ways to unwind at home instead. 'Rest does not always require leaving the home,' says Ewelina. 'Creating short, protected breaks can be very effective.' You can do this by identifying set pockets of time where you can briefly step out of carer mode. The length of time matters less than the intention - even ten minutes of genuine rest can help your body and mind to reset. If it is possible, avoid using this time for completing chores, problem-solving or planning - rest is not something that should be productive.

Some ways of making time for yourself at home might include:

- Reading, listening to music or watching something comforting
- Gentle exercise, stretching or yoga
- Creative activities such as writing, painting or crafting
- Quiet moments of reflection, mindfulness or doing some breathing exercises
- Sitting in a quiet room with a hot drink

The key is to choose something that genuinely helps you to decompress and not something that ends up feeling like just another obligation. Try to create a calming space within the home, such as a specific chair or a corner in a room that signals rest.



It can also help to establish boundaries within the home where you are not actively 'on duty'. If support is available, then use it to protect this time. 'This could be resting in a quiet room while someone else sits with your loved one or using professional home care support for a few hours so you can sleep, read, or simply have uninterrupted time,' says Ewelina. Over time, protecting these moments of 'micro rest' can make a real difference to how you cope on a daily basis. Setting boundaries is not about withdrawing care, but rather about making caregiving more sustainable in the long run.

Building a support system

Responsible caregiving is accepting that you can't do it all by yourself. It's usually only once a caregiver reaches their breaking point that they might finally turn to others as a last resort. It is essential, though, to put a plan in place long before desperation takes hold.

Many carers hesitate to use respite services because they think it equates to them failing in their role; in reality, respite care exists because caring, especially for someone with dementia, is demanding, and no-one is meant to do it alone. Respite care is short-term support that allows carers to take a break, while



Signs you need a break

Caregivers are often skilled at pushing through fatigue. They may tell themselves that they can cope a little longer, or that others have it much worse than them. However, the body will eventually force you to rest, whether you choose to or not.

'One of the earliest signs is constant exhaustion that does not improve with rest,' says Ewelina. 'Physical symptoms such as headaches, poor sleep or frequent colds can also be warning signs.' Aches and pains, decreased energy or changes in appetite can also be somatic signals that stress is starting to take its toll.

Some behavioural or psychological indicators that it might be time for a break include losing interest in the activities you once enjoyed; feeling growing resentment towards your caregiving role; feeling trapped, hopeless or overwhelmed; difficulties concentrating or making decisions; or thoughts of hurting either yourself or the person you care for. 'Caregivers may feel irritable, tearful or emotionally numb, or notice they are becoming less patient with the person they care for,' adds Ewelina.

If you resonate with any of these, then it's time to reach out for help from family, friends or professional respite services.

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ensuring that the person with dementia continues to receive safe, appropriate care. It can be planned or used in an emergency and can last anywhere from an hour to several weeks at a time.

Respite can take many forms, including having a support worker visit the home for a couple of hours, day centres or activity groups, short stays in residential care, as well as informal help offered from family or friends. The benefits of utilising respite care are boundless: it can significantly reduce exhaustion and stress, prevent caregiver burnout, provide reassurance during illness or a crisis and improve the quality of our own caregiving, because a rested caregiver is often calmer, more patient, and better able to manage challenges.

However, some caregivers may still feel concern about handing over their responsibilities to others because they worry it may distress or confuse their loved one, or that nobody else will be able to care for them as well as they do. It's true that change can be difficult for people with dementia; however, many adapt much better than expected, especially when respite is introduced gradually and thoughtfully.

Some ways to best take advantage of respite include:

- **Starting small to build confidence**

If the idea of respite feels daunting, begin with something manageable, such

as asking someone you trust to sit with your loved one while you go for a walk or arranging short, regular visits from the same carer to build trust and familiarity. Day services can also be trialled before increasing frequency.

- **Accepting help when it's offered – even if it's imperfect**

Family and friends can help out in a variety of ways, from taking your loved one out for a couple of hours, running errands, or just providing some much-needed companionship. 'Being clear and specific about what you need makes it easier for others to help,' says Ewelina. 'Remember that many people want to support but do not know how to unless they are asked.' Give them a designated job by creating a list of specific tasks that

“A rested caregiver is calmer and better able to manage challenges”



you need help with, or better yet, draw up a care routine that involves others (with recommended time slots for them to cover so that you can take a break). Not only will this be of benefit to you, but it will help the person with dementia to stay socially active, too.

• Planning for longer breaks or holidays

For many carers, the idea of taking a holiday seems unfeasible. The fear of something going wrong or of their loved one feeling abandoned can be overwhelming, but time away is a necessity, especially for long-term carers. 'Taking a longer break is not abandoning your role; it is protecting your ability to continue caring healthily,' says Ewelina. 'Taking time away can restore energy, perspective and emotional balance, which benefits everyone involved.' If you are considering a holiday, preparation is key: explore respite options well in advance, gradually introduce alternative carers, write down routines, preferences and reassurance strategies, and reassure your loved one gently, without overloading them with information. You may need to try short breaks at first, like an afternoon away or an overnight stay, before taking a longer holiday. Each positive experience builds confidence, and knowing your loved one is safe and content can make it easier to rest while you're away. Many caregivers find that returning refreshed helps them to continue caring with renewed strength.

Respite care works best when part of an ongoing care package, rather than something used only during a crisis. It is one of the most important tools for caregivers to help them stay supported and able to continue in their role.

Perhaps the most important thing carers need is to give themselves permission: permission to rest, permission to ask for help and permission to step back. Caring for someone with dementia is not a test of endurance or self-sacrifice. By allowing yourself to rest, whether through micro-breaks, time out of the house or longer breaks away, you are making it possible to sustain the demands of caregiving in the long term. After all, dementia is a marathon, not a sprint.

What type of rest do you need?

Dr Sandra Dalton-Smith outlined the idea of there being seven types of rest in her book, *Sacred Rest*, based on her work treating burnout and chronic exhaustion. Caring for someone with dementia can make traditional rest unrealistic, so the aim shifts from long breaks to intentional micro-rest that fits into your other duties.

Physical rest

What it does: Helps support your body's recovery.

Why it's hard for carers to do: Their role might involve lifting, interrupted sleep as well as constant vigilance.

What helps: Resting while they rest, gentle stretching, yoga, massages and using assistive tools (gait belts, shower chairs) to reduce strain.

Mental rest

What it does: Quiets your brain.

Why it's hard for carers to do: Each day involves planning, monitoring, and making decisions.

What helps: Scheduling quiet moments with no input, reducing multitasking and keeping written routines and checklists handy so you're not having to remember everything all the time.

Sensory rest

What it does: Reduces overload from stimulation.

Why it's hard for carers to do: Each day brings alarms, repetitive questions, TV noise and lights.

What helps: Dimming lights, lowering background noise if possible and using earplugs or noise-cancelling headphones.

Emotional rest

What it does: Allows you to 'drop the mask'.

Why it's hard for carers to do: The expectation to 'hold it together'.

What helps: Having someone you can speak honestly with, or journaling emotions you don't feel comfortable expressing out loud.

Social rest

What it does: Balances your social energy.

Why it's hard for carers to do: They can feel isolated and/or have draining interactions.

What helps: Spending time with people who recharge you, limiting conversations with people who minimise your experience and short, supportive contact (eg texts or five-minute calls).

Creative rest

What it does: Restores inspiration and imagination.

Why it's hard for carers to do: Creativity feels frivolous when practical matters take priority.

What helps: Time spent in nature and enjoying art, music and beauty.

Spiritual rest

What it does: Connects you to meaning and purpose.

Why it's hard for carers to do: Caring becomes your world.

What helps: Short grounding rituals, meditation, reflection, volunteering or feeling part of something bigger than yourself.

