

## Dementia - tips for parents and grandparents

This information is provided from the Alzheimer's Association Australia Help Sheets.

Although the vast majority of people with dementia are elderly, there are often young children and adolescents in the household - or close by - who are strongly affected by the illness of someone they love. It may be their grandparent who is affected by the illness or, in the case of younger onset dementia, their own parent. At a time when they are trying to cope with their own growing up, they find that they also have to cope with a family member who is ill.

### Telling the children

The most important way to help children or grandchildren cope with dementia is to talk openly and be willing to listen. They need the opportunity to ask questions and express their feelings without fear of a negative reaction. Remember that young children may not be able to take in too much information at one time. Keep it simple and try to respond to their questions at their own level.

### Adolescents

Adolescents are often good at expressing themselves and their feelings, but don't be surprised if they do not initiate discussion. Watch for clues in their behaviour that something is on their mind and then try to talk openly. Some young people may have problems talking with parents because they don't want to worry them, or are afraid of making them sad or being an extra burden. They may prefer to talk to people of their own age or to counsellors.

### Remember - children will react differently

Young people will react differently to dementia depending on:

- Their age and stage of development
- Their personality
- How important the person with dementia is in their lives
- How often they interact with that person.

### Questions young people may ask

- What's happening to the person with dementia?
- Why is it happening?
- Why can't medicine make them better?
- Did I do something to make them sick?
- Will I get it too?
- Will they die?
- What can I do to make it better?
- Who will take care of me?
- Why is everyone always so sad and angry?
- Why can't things be the way they were?

### Emotions young people may feel

Young people, like adults, may feel a range of feelings, including:

- Fear
- Guilt
- Denial
- Jealousy
- Resentment
- Frustration
- Anger
- Sadness
- Tension or stress
- Embarrassment
- An overwhelming sense of responsibility
- Unwillingness to take responsibility
- Despair and hopelessness
- Helplessness.

## Things you can try

You can help young people to cope with their feelings about dementia if you:

- Let them know that they are cared for and acknowledge that it is tough on them as well.
- Give them permission to say what they really feel - don't be afraid of their feelings (or your own).
- Help them confront and deal with their worst fears. Sometimes these fears may be unrealistic but they are certainly very real to the child.
- Try to maintain as much family structure as possible. Continue to do some of the things you used to do as a family, as this will give your children a feeling of security and self-confidence.
- Try to spend some time with them each day. It is important that they continue to have separate time where they are the focus of your attention.
- Make family plans and carry them out. Persist even though there may not be overwhelming enthusiasm for your suggestions.
- Use respite care services to give everybody a break.
- Encourage teenagers to get on with their lives and make their own plans.
- Deal with conflicts and problems. Don't ignore them.
- Set aside special times when the family can discuss responsibilities and problems, but try not to make 'helping' the overriding concern.
- Notify the child's teacher or school counsellor that there is a serious illness in the family. Check with the school from time to time to see if the child has experienced any problems.
- Encourage learning about dementia in the school environment. Contact Alzheimer's Australia Vic to find out about appropriate resources.
- Carers need to take care of themselves and reassure children that they will not get sick too.

## Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Your local community health service
- Carers Victoria Tel 1800 242 636
- Alzheimer's Australia National Dementia Helpline Tel. 1800 100 500. Anyone in the family can ring. The trained counsellor on the line can provide practical information as well as emotional support. An appointment can also be arranged with a professional counsellor for any family member, including children.
- Carers Resource Centres, Australia wide Tel. 1800 242 636

**This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:**

Alzheimer's Australia Victoria

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