
Role of a carer

Summary

- Taking on a care role can be a big commitment so make sure you know what you'll need to do and how the role may change over time.
 - Being a carer can have benefits, including strengthening your relationship with the person you care for.
 - Caring for someone can mean giving up financial, social and wellbeing opportunities during your time as a carer.
 - While caring for someone it's important to look after your own health and wellbeing.
 - The Commonwealth and Victorian Governments provide support for carers, including respite (short breaks) and support groups. The Commonwealth Government also provides financial assistance.
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Many people have care roles. For example, parents care for their children, grown children care for their parents and people care for friends and relatives who are sick or recovering from an accident.

More than 700,000 Victorians are a personal carer for a family member or friend who is older with care needs, has a disability or has a mental health or other chronic health condition.

Chances are you will take on a carer role or be cared for at some point in your lifetime.

Defining the term 'carer' can be difficult because it means different things to different people. 'Carer' can refer to both paid and unpaid, professional and 'lay' carers. Some family and friends may not consider themselves as a 'carer' because they may see themselves as simply playing their part as a supportive partner, father, sister, daughter or friend.

Unpaid carers

People take on a carer role for someone they know to improve that person's quality of life. Carers may be partners, parents, sons or daughters, siblings, other relatives, friends or neighbours.

Sometimes a person takes on a care role gradually, supporting the person more and more as their health or ability to care for themselves diminishes over time. Sometimes a care role comes about suddenly such as after an accident or after a health crisis (for example, a stroke or heart attack).

Carers can help someone to be as independent, healthy and well as possible. This might be through helping someone stay connected to their local community, or be physically and mentally active, or eat nutritious food. Some carers might have to help someone with tasks like banking, shopping and housework where the person is quite independent. Other carers may have a more intensive care role helping with all daily living tasks – feeding, bathing, dressing, going to the toilet and taking medicines.

Deciding to become a carer

Taking on a care role can be a big commitment. In some cases it can mean giving up other activities or responsibilities, including other work opportunities, which could have a significant financial impact.

Some people see taking on a care role as their duty – either to a partner, parent, sibling or grown child – that they take on willingly. Others see it as their responsibility to bear because of cultural reasons or simply because there is 'no one else who can do it'.

When deciding if you are willing to become a carer it might help to consider the following:

- How much care does the person need? Will it be only for a few hours a day or all day and night? Could
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someone else help (including formal and informal respite)?

- How can you support the person to keep on doing the things they love at home or in their local community? Who else could help?
- How could you best support the person's independence, health and wellbeing? The person's capabilities and interests may change over time, but maintaining independence, health and wellbeing will always be important.
- What kind of care does the person need? Do they only need help with a few tasks such as laundry, meals and taking their medicines or do they need more basic needs met such as help with dressing, eating, showering and going to the toilet? Are you able to provide the support they need?
- Can you afford it? Taking on a care role might mean cutting back or giving up employment. It might even leave you out of pocket in terms of purchasing aids and equipment required to support the person (installing hand rails, buying a special chair). Investigating your eligibility for government supports might be a part of your decision-making process.
- Do you want to do it? Sometimes you might feel like you do not have a choice in the matter, but you also need to consider your own needs. You will be no good to the person or to yourself if you resent your care role.

Carers say there can be many rewards to caring including:

- the satisfaction of knowing you have helped someone who needs you, enabling them to improve their quality of life
- strengthening the relationship with the person you care for
- the opportunity for personal growth and to develop new skills
- proving to yourself that you can meet new challenges
- appreciation from the person you care for and acknowledgement from family and friends.

But there can also be many challenges, which include:

- the financial hardship associated with having to give up or cut back hours in a paid job or career
- the emotional and physical toll associated with looking after another person day and night
- the lack of satisfaction that you previously got from a stimulating career or job
- developing health issues such as back problems, anxiety or depression
- the continuous nature of some care roles
- feeling isolated and missing the social opportunities associated with work, recreation and leisure activities.

Supporting carers and the people they care for

Carers play an important role in our society, creating many social and economic benefits for themselves, the people they care for and the whole community. There is a wide range of services and organisations that support the health, wellbeing and independence of carers and the people they care for. This helps them to maintain their relationship with each other.

To help in your role as a carer you might consider:

- applying for Australian Government financial support, such as the Carer Payment and Carer Allowance
- respite care inside the home or outside (where both you and the person you care for can have a short break from the care relationship)
- other types of support that may be available, for example support to spend time together doing something you both enjoy
- asking other family members or friends of the person to help you on a regular or informal basis
- joining a local support group for carers
- contacting Carers Victoria to have a chat when caring gets tough.

Where to get help

- Your doctor

- Your local council
- Carers Victoria, call (03) 9396 9500

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