

Becoming an elder carer

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The transition to becoming a carer can be sudden, or it can happen gradually over time. It can be through necessity or by choice, and last for a short period of time, or for months or years. Those who take on the role of caring for an older person are usually spouses or adult children.

They are often responsible for managing the activities associated with the older person's physical and emotional care, as well as medical and financial issues.

Although caring for others can be a fulfilling and rewarding experience, it can also take a toll on the carer's health, employment, finances and relationships.

Having strong personal and social relationships is vital to maintaining a carer's wellbeing. The good news is that help is available to support both the carer and those being cared for.

Taking control

Being a carer often involves dealing with uncertainty and problem solving on a daily basis.

Finding out about helpful and effective services ahead of time can increase your confidence and ability to find solutions when you need them.

There is growing recognition of the value and importance of carers. Victorian Government policies emphasise carer's rights and promote increased support networks.

The My Aged Care website provides information on services for those caring for someone at home. These include respite, domestic help, home maintenance, nursing care, counselling and transport. There are many support services available that can help you. Visit www.myagedcare.gov.au/caring-someone/caring-someone-home.

See Relationships Australia Victoria's information sheets for an overview of the range of aged care services. Visit www.relationshipsvictoria.com.au/senior-relationship-services

Finances

There are significant costs involved in caring for another person, which can also include a loss of income.

If you have concerns about finances, a financial counsellor may be helpful in developing a sustainable plan.

Financial Counselling Victoria provides a free and confidential service. Call (03) 9553 3227 or visit www.financial-counselling.org.au.

The Department of Human Services website provides information on carer payments and allowances. Visit www.humanservices.gov.au.

Health care

Health care professionals can help to address the concerns of both older people and carers, including a carer's wellbeing and ability to manage situations.

They are valuable sources of information about what to do and where to go for help with medical issues that may arise.

Respite care

As a carer, having a support network is vital, particularly when dealing with challenging behaviours or aggression.

It is not unusual for carers to feel overwhelmed, guilty or resentful because of the demands placed on them. This is often an indication that their responsibilities are taking a toll and they may need a break. Unfortunately though, this is not always recognised until people reach breaking point.

Respite care gives carers the opportunity to take a break from their caring responsibilities. It can be informally given at home by family and friends, or more structured respite

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services are available. Services that provide meaningful support and activities for the person in care, rather than purely respite care, may be most helpful.

Information on respite is available on the Carers Australia Victoria website. Visit www.carersvictoria.org.au/respite.

Advance planning

Future decision-making can seem overwhelming when your time and energy are focused on everyday caregiving responsibilities, so it's important to be prepared and informed about legal and medical options early on. Some common legal documents to assist carers are:

- **Enduring Power of Attorney:** This document formally appoints another person(s) to make financial and/or personal decisions on another person's behalf. It allows caregivers to undertake tasks such as contacting government agencies, paying bills and attending medical appointments.
- **Advanced Health Directive (AHD):** The AHD is a legal document that enables the person in care to give instructions about their health care when they are no longer able to do so. The AHD lets the person in care continue to influence treatment decisions, even if they are not able to actively participate in the decision-making process. When it is required, the AHD informs decisions and takes pressure off family members to make difficult choices.

General information on legal and financial matters is available from the following websites.

- Australian Government Carer Gateway: www.carergateway.gov.au/legal-rights
- Seniors Rights Victoria: www.seniorsrights.org.au/legal-services

Self-care

Even though you're caring for someone else, it's important to take care of yourself as well. The caring relationship involves two people with equal needs.

Use every resource available to look after yourself, particularly as your time becomes more valuable. Keep the following tips in mind.

- **Be realistic about what you can achieve.** Don't overwhelm yourself - wearing yourself out isn't helpful. Maintain social relationships and activities as much as you can. Remember, what's good for you outside your role as a carer will help you in your caring role.
- **Connect with other carers.** Support from other caregivers can provide reassurance that what you are feeling and experiencing is normal. If you feel like you don't have time for this face-to-face, an online support group or telephone helpline could help.

- **Focus on acceptance, love and humour.** These make caregiving meaningful and can help to make the difficult times more bearable.
- **Get a support buddy.** Consider asking a friend or family member to check in with you on a regular basis. They can often be a fresh set of eyes that help you decide if you need more support.
- **Take care of your health.** Getting enough rest, feeding your body with nutritious foods, exercising and getting regular check-ups can keep you from burning out or becoming depressed.

Don't give up on getting help. It's important to realise you're not alone. Whether it's family or friends, trained professionals and organisations, or local and national support services, don't be afraid to reach out for help.

When times get tough

Even the most resilient carers can sometimes feel that it's hard to cope. Working with a counsellor may be helpful in dealing with these feelings, developing coping strategies, or working through other challenges such as family conflict and isolation.

For some, these feelings and experiences can lead to problems with depression or anxiety. Common symptoms include constant worrying about the future, changes in eating or sleeping patterns, low energy, and feelings of helplessness or hopelessness.

“ One person caring about another represents life's greatest value.

- Jim Rohn

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If you are experiencing symptoms that are having a negative effect on your physical or mental health, talk to your General Practitioner (GP) about your concerns. GPs can also refer you to a psychologist for counselling through a Mental Health Plan, which is funded by Medicare.

Some carers find that the constant stress of caring leads to a loss of patience, which can result in the physical or emotional mistreatment of older people.

If this starts happening for you, seek help straight away. There are a range of confidential and non-judgemental services available to support carers and those being cared for in these situations.

- Carers Australia Victoria provides specialised support, counselling and information. Visit www.carersvictoria.org.au/how-we-help/counselling
- UnitingCare lifeAssist offers a range of programs and services to support carer wellbeing. Call 1300 277 478 or visit www.lifeassist.org.au/carer-wellbeing

Family support

The pressures of caregiving can often strain family relationships. It often falls on one family member to take primary responsibility for caring, while others may offer support from the sidelines.

When negotiating family conversations about caregiving and responsibilities, keep the following things in mind.

- **Communication, rather than expectations, is key.** Don't wait for others to offer help, or expect they

will know what to do without being asked. Other family members may think you are coping fine, or may not be sure what they should or can do.

- **Decide specifically what you need help with.** For example, arranging or attending doctor's appointments, or having a break each week. Have clear goals and specific requests. This is usually better received by others and much easier to achieve.
- **Be patient.** Keep in mind that when a family member is ageing, there is often confusion, anxiety and stress for all family members involved.

Relationships Australia Victoria provides counselling and mediation services for individuals, couples and families. Our services can assist in facilitating conversations between older adults, carers and other family members to explore options and make decisions regarding family arrangements and healthcare services. Visit www.rav.org.au/elder-relationship-services for more information. To find your nearest location, call 1300 364 277 or visit www.rav.org.au/locations.

About Relationships Australia Victoria (RAV)

RAV is a valued provider of specialist family and relationship services. A community-based, not-for-profit organisation with no religious affiliations, our services are for all members of the community, regardless of their religion, age, gender, sexual orientation, lifestyle choice, cultural background or economic circumstances.

Visit www.rav.org.au or call 1300 364 277 for more information on our programs, locations and how to access our services.

RAV also provides professional development workshops and accredited training on mediation and family dispute resolution. Courses include our five-day Mediation Training Short Course and our Graduate Diploma of Family Dispute Resolution. For more information, visit www.rav.org.au/training.



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