

Becoming an elder carer



TIP SHEET

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 carers' rights and promote increased support networks.

The **My Aged Care website** provides information on support services available for those caring for someone at home, including respite, domestic help, home maintenance, nursing care, counselling and transport. To find out more, call 1800 200 422 or visit www.myagedcare.gov.au/caring-someone

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.

Contact the following services for more information:

- **National Debt Helpline:** Call 1800 007 007 or visit www.ndh.org.au
- **Salvation Army:** Call 13 72 58 or visit www.salvationarmy.org.au/need-help/financial-assistance
- **Services Australia:** www.servicesaustralia.gov.au

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 services are available.

Services that provide meaningful support and activities for the person in care, rather than purely respite care, can sometimes be more helpful.

For information on respite care, contact:

- **Carers Victoria:** Visit www.carersvictoria.org.au or call 1800 514 845
- **Carer Gateway:** Visit www.carergateway.gov.au or call 1800 422 737

Relationships Australia
VICTORIA

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.

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 such as powers of attorney and Advance Care Directives.

Powers of attorney

These are legal documents that allow someone to appoint another person/s to make nominated decisions for them, or to support them in making and giving effect to their decisions.



Advanced Care Directive

This allows a person to give written instructions of their preferences for future care, and may include their values, life goals and preferred outcomes, or directions for care and treatment.

For more information, call **Advance Care Planning Australia** on 1300 208 582 or visit their website at www.advancecareplanning.org.au

Office of the Public Advocate (OPA)

The **OPA** provides forms and information related to enduring powers of attorney, guardianship and administration and medical treatment decision-making.

For advice, visit www.publicadvocate.vic.gov.au or call 1300 309 337.

General information on legal and financial matters is available from the following organisations:

- **Carer Gateway:** Call 1800 422 737 or visit www.carergateway.gov.au/help-advice
- **Seniors Rights Victoria:** Call 1300 368 821 or visit <https://seniorsrights.org.au/get-help>

! Self-care tips

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 to meet face-to-face, try an online support group or phone catch-up instead.
- **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 to 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.

It's important to remember that **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 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.

If you're experiencing symptoms that are having a negative effect on your physical or mental health, talk to your General Practitioner (GP) about your concerns. GPs may also be able to 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.

- **Carer Gateway Counselling Service:** <https://counselling.carergateway.gov.au>
- **Carers Victoria:** www.carersvictoria.org.au
- **Uniting Vic Tas:** www.unitingvictas.org.au/services/carers/carers-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.



Need more support?

We provide individual and family counselling, family dispute resolution and elder mediation services. Visit www.rav.org.au to find out how we can help.

About us

Relationships Australia Victoria has over 70 years' experience providing family and relationship support services across Melbourne and Victoria.

We are committed to providing safe, inclusive and accessible services for all people.



We acknowledge the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the Traditional Owners of the lands and waterways of Australia and we support Aboriginal people's right to self-determination and culturally safe services.

We recognise the lifelong impacts of childhood trauma.

We recognise those who had children taken away from them.