

# CARERS AND SLEEP PROBLEMS



## CARING FOR SOMEONE WHO HAS SLEEP PROBLEMS

A good night's sleep gives the body and brain time to rest and recuperate helping you to feel refreshed and ready for a new day. But when you are caring for someone who has sleep problems chances are your sleep is being affected too.

There are many types of sleep disorders including insomnia (difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep), narcolepsy (extreme tiredness with involuntary napping during the day) and sleep apnoea (where the upper airway is blocked causing breathing to stop for a time during sleep).

Many of these symptoms are associated with medical conditions such as Alzheimer's, anxiety, depression and autism spectrum disorder. Some symptoms can be a side effect of a medication which is treating an underlying medical condition.

*It is estimated that over 1.2 million Australians (6% of the population) experience sleep disorders.<sup>1</sup>*

If you are caring for a family member or friend who is experiencing symptoms of sleep disorder, you might find it hard to get a good night's sleep yourself. And if this continues over a long period of time, your own health and wellbeing can suffer.

Caring can be difficult at the best of times; it can feel almost impossible if you are exhausted from lack of sleep. You might find your concentration and judgement is impaired by lack of sleep. You might become irritable and depressed.

To help you last the distance, make sure you access all the support that is available to you.

It is important to know that you are not alone and that help is available.

## TREATING SLEEP DISORDERS

Some sleep disorders may be managed by treating the underlying medical condition. Other specific treatments include specialised sleep clinics, relaxation training, behavioural/ psychotherapeutic treatments, and medications. Talk to your GP about possible treatments and support for the person you care for. See the Quick Tips on this factsheet for some ideas to help you, and the person you care for, to get a better night's sleep.

## WHEN ONLY A BREAK WILL DO

Treating a sleep disorder (or an underlying condition) may take a long time. Sometimes a period of respite may be the only way you can catch up on your own

sleep. You might consider asking another family member to take over the caring role for a night, or find out what types of community respite options are available.

It is important to acknowledge that your health and wellbeing is important to building the resilience and capacity to cope with caring.

Contact the Carer Advisory Line on 1800 242 636 for advice and information about supports and services to help you.

## QUICK TIPS:

Here are some strategies for getting a restful night's sleep for you and the person you care for.

- Develop a regular sleep routine. This means getting to bed (and waking) at a set time every day.
- Create a cosy bedroom environment that is quiet, at the right temperature and with dim lighting.
- Are your mattress and pillow comfortable? Is your bedding and nightwear comfortable?
- Don't go to bed with an empty stomach and don't eat or drink within two hours of bedtime.
- Exercise is great for general health and for tiring you out - but not too close to bedtime.
- Several hours before bedtime cut out all stimulants: alcohol, coffee (and other caffeinated drinks), cigarettes, television (and any other screens).
- Find out what relaxes you. A glass of warm milk or herbal tea? A warm bath? Essential oils or soothing music?

Contact the Carer Advisory Line for more information 1800 242 636.

1. Access Economics (2004) Wake up Australia: the value of healthy sleep. Sleep Health Australia.

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## CARERS WHO HAVE SLEEP PROBLEMS

The demands of caring can be relentless and stressful, and many carers will experience sleep problems as a result. But lack of sleep can affect your resilience, making it harder to cope with stress thus creating a vicious cycle.

Some carers provide 24-hour nursing assistance to a family member with high care needs.

Others care for people who are fairly independent but may need help occasionally. The greater the physical

and emotional demands of your caring role, the more likely you are to feel stress.

For some carers, relationships can change under the pressures of illness and adversity. There might be greater levels of conflict and frustration in your family. You may even be caring for someone you have always had a difficult relationship with.

Aside from the worries about the person they are caring for, carers may also worry about juggling paid employment and whether they will have enough money.

*Sleep interruption is the most commonly reported effect of caring, impacting on half (51 per cent) of primary carers.<sup>2</sup>*

Disturbed sleep or insomnia is a common sign that stress levels are too high.

It is important to acknowledge that your health and wellbeing is important to building the resilience and capacity to cope with caring.

See the tips over the page on getting a good night's sleep and then think about getting some help to manage the stresses of your caring role.

To help you last the distance, make sure you access all the support that is available to you.

## SUPPORT FOR THE PERSON YOU CARE FOR

It can be frustrating not understanding the symptoms and behaviours of the person you care for. Arming yourself with information can help you (and the person you care for) to feel more in control and confident.

Many carers say that what would help them most is better services for the person they care for. But it can be difficult to know where to begin, or how to find the organisation that offers the support and services your family needs.

Speaking to your family GP is a great place to start. And a good website for general health information is [www.healthinsite.gov.au](http://www.healthinsite.gov.au)

## SUPPORT FOR YOU

Talk to your GP about possible treatments for your sleep problems.

There are also a number of organisations which offer supports and services to help carers to reduce stress and balance their caring role.

Contact the Carer Advisory Line on 1800 242 636 for advice and information about supports and services to help you.

## QUICK TIPS:

When you are caring for someone else you often put your own needs last. These tips are a reminder that your own health and wellbeing is important; they are also practical strategies that can help to manage stress.

- Eat well. A nutritious balanced diet will give you the fuel your body needs to keep on caring. Eat lots of fresh fruit and vegetables and cut down on sugary and fatty snacks.
- Exercise regularly. Physical exercise can relieve tension and reduce stress levels.
- Share the care. Let family members and friends know that their help and support is welcome.
- Talk it over. With a friend or family member or with a
- professional counsellor. Join a Carer Support Group and meet other people to share tips and experiences.
- Take a break. Do something that you love ... or do nothing but relax and recharge your batteries.

Contact the Carer Advisory Line for more information 1800 242 636.

2. Australian Bureau of Statistics (2009) Caring in the community. ABS, Canberra.

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