



Tips for Caring for a Spouse with Dementia

You promised to love and care for your spouse for better or for worse. You had many good years together building your lives, raising a family and supporting each other's dreams. You were excited to enjoy retirement and looked forward to spending time with family in your golden years.

That future changed with the dementia diagnosis. You see glimpses of your husband or wife still, especially when the grandkids come around. You see their eyes light up and feel the joy they feel. But you also feel the loss of a future you won't ever get back.

The burdens you used to share you now bear alone. And although you still have times when you laugh together and feel their love, you find impatience bubbling up when they can't perform a task they could do just yesterday. Guilt, stress and frustration follow close behind. It's a rollercoaster of emotions.

It's a big undertaking to care for your spouse with dementia. They depend on you more every day. And you feel more and more stress as the disease progresses, not knowing where to turn next or how to handle a difficult situation.

You've probably been noticing changes in your husband or wife daily. Below are some of the common cognitive signs of dementia:

- Losing things and not being able to retrace steps
- Difficulty communicating, problem-solving and planning
- Memory deficits that disrupt daily life
- Poor judgement
- Confusion and disorientation
- Difficulty completing regular tasks

- Repetitive speech or actions
- Wandering
- Difficulty with motor skills

These changes are challenging, but the psychological changes can push you to your limits. You've borne the weight of the personality changes, withdrawal from social activities, agitation, depression, anxiety, inappropriate behavior and paranoia. At times, the stress leaves you teetering on the edge.

Please know, you are not alone. What you feel and how you react to those feelings are normal human emotions and reactions. Many other spouses have felt the same things as they navigate the minefield of caring for their loved one with dementia. You have the right to feel the way you do; you're in the midst of a challenging journey.

Again, you are not alone. And there is help.

Caregiver burnout signs

If you find yourself losing patience with your husband or wife too often or feeling like you're failing them, you may be burning out. It happens to many spouse caregivers. Do you see any of these signs in yourself?

- **Social withdrawal**—Have you lost touch with your friends or don't take part in activities you used to enjoy?
- **Anxiety**—Are you worried you won't be able to provide the care needed as the disease progresses? Or anxious about how your finances will hold up?
- **Depression**—Do you wake up in the morning thinking you can't face another day? Or feel like your spirit is broken by the weight of your responsibilities?

- **Exhaustion**—Are you so tired you find it nearly impossible to complete tasks you need to complete?
- **Sleeplessness**—Do you lay awake at night worried about how you're going to keep going? Or worried about the toll dementia is taking on your spouse?
- **Anger**—Do you get angry when your spouse can't do the things they used to be able to do? Or get angry at yourself for failing to notice an obvious problem?
- **Lack of concentration**—Have you been forgetting doctor appointments? Or find you can't focus on the task at hand?
- **Irritability**—Are you moody and find yourself lashing out at others for the smallest things?
- **Health problems**—All of these things take a toll on your physical health. Do you remember the last time you felt good physically?
- **Denial**—Do you deny your spouse's disease is permanent? Or deny you are struggling with their care?

If you see one or more of these signs in yourself, it's time to get some tools to help you cope with the great but difficult work you're doing for your spouse. They need you to be at your best as often as possible.

Coping tips for spouse caregivers

You've been doing your best taking care of your husband or wife. As you've done that, your own emotional, mental and physical health may be suffering. It's a natural side effect if you aren't proactive about caring for yourself.

Many tools and methods can help you cope with the stresses of caring for your spouse. See if any of these coping tips are doable in your situation.

Knowledge tips

- **Know the doctors**—Build a relationship with your spouse's doctors and medical staff. They can provide support and information.
- **Know the facts**—Learn about dementia and its effects so you are prepared and can react in a more constructive way.

Physical care tips

- **Get help**—Ask a trusted friend or family member for help in making sure you take care of yourself.
- **Exercise**—Take time to exercise, even if it's only for a few minutes at a time.
- **Sleep**—Get plenty of rest to recharge physically and emotionally.
- **Feed your body**—Eat a balanced diet but enjoy a treat here and there.
- **Relax**—Try relaxation techniques such as meditation, yoga, breathing techniques or repetitive prayer.

Emotional care tips

- **Give love**—Speak with love and understanding to your spouse rather than anger or frustration. Using a low, calm voice can really help diffuse a bad situation.
- **Take a moment**—When a difficult moment arises, take a few deep breaths before reacting. If you need to, leave the room for a couple minutes to regroup.
- **Talk it out**—Find someone you can talk to about your feelings of frustration and loneliness.
- **Feed your soul**—If you are religious or spiritual, make time for prayer, church or other spiritual activities.
- **Be grateful**—Remember that this time is precious with them. Try to bring joy to them at as many moments as possible. It will bring you joy, too.

Action care tips

- **Create structure**—Plan activities you can do with your spouse to help them feel useful and fulfilled.
- **Get out of the house**—Take time to get out to visit friends, do some shopping or have a night out. If you feel like you can't leave your spouse alone or with someone else, it may be time to consider some additional care options.
- **Nurture creativity**—Resurrect a hobby you love and find a way to involve your spouse in the activity. Maybe you can read to them or show them a picture you drew.

The best tip

- **Write it all down**—Keep a journal as you travel this road with your loved one. Write about memories, good times and the things you're grateful for. Also use the journal to create structure in your days by noting what works and what doesn't and how the disease is progressing. This can give you greater control over situations and provide important information for the doctor. Use a different color pen for recording the great stuff so you can go back and revisit those times when you need a boost.

You don't have to use all these tools. Use what you feel would lead you to a more peaceful and joyful life taking care of your spouse. Put yourself in the best position you can so you can enjoy the time you have with them.

And know that they are often deeply touched by the way you're caring for them. They still love you, even if they have a hard time showing it. Love them right back.

If you have any other questions about how to best support your spouse on their journey or want to learn more about our memory care services, visit www.primroseretirement.com. We're here to help in any way you need us.