



Working with Carers

Caring for someone with a mental illness is a complex role, which requires significant commitment, training, understanding and support. Due to comprehensive reform of the community mental health sector and significant advances in the safety and efficacy of psychotropic medications, an increasing number of people living with a mental illness now live in the community, with the support of carers and mental health professionals.

Carers can take many forms. Unpaid carers may include family members, friends or neighbours who assist someone with a disability, who is ageing or has an ongoing mental health issue or other illness. Approximately 2.7 million Australians (12% of the population) provide help and support to a family member or friend.¹ As well as unpaid carers, there are also a range of roles for paid carers in the mental health sector. This may be via the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), and/or self-employment, public or private institutions.²

Supporting the carer

Carers face significant challenges and often need support as much as those they are caring for.

- Carer distress: almost 2 in 3 carers report low or moderate distress levels and 1 in 3 report high or very high distress levels¹
- Carers may feel that they don't really have a choice,³ that they are providing care due to necessity and because of their relationship to the person
- Their own health issues may be neglected or injuries may be sustained, as a result of being a carer
- Stigma attached to caring for someone with mental illness
- Social isolation or lack of social support
- Financial stress

Carers, particularly paid carers may face inadequate remuneration and training, which may in turn result in high staff turnover, inexperienced staff/carers and higher rates of burn-out.

Carers are an essential asset to the health care team (including Dietitians) of the person they care for and should be involved in the Nutrition Care Process.

People living with a mental illness may have certain behaviours which have the potential to negatively impact on their nutritional status and health outcomes, including:

1. Cognitive impairment such as memory difficulties, reduced capacity to plan and organise (including goal setting), reduced decision-making ability, compromised language and communication skills, poor information processing, reduced motivation
2. Mood influencing eating behaviours including cycles of non-hunger-based eating (comfort, emotional, binge eating) and exercise
3. Poor social engagement and connectivity, chronic boredom
4. Poor impulse control and reduced ability to delay gratification

These challenges, alongside any use of psychotropic medication(s), often result in less healthy lifestyle choices and poorer physical health. For more information about the nutrition issues in mental health, refer to the MHANDi resource package '[2.0 Understanding Nutrition Needs in Mental Health](#)', available on DINER.

On a practical level, this means that nutrition assessment and intervention can be challenging and benefit greatly from the input of a carer or other support workers. Dietitians can harness the intimate knowledge, experiences and close relationship of carers and other workers with the person living with a mental illness for:

- Clearer assessment, including available supports, current habits and dietary intake
- Understanding of past efforts and what is likely to be effective (or not effective)
- Planning realistic dietary and lifestyle changes
- Identification of required day-to-day supports to implement diet and lifestyle strategies
- Person's nutrition knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, readiness to change

Dietitians can work with the carer and/or other members of the mental health care team to reinforce the goals made with the person living with a mental illness. For more information about working with mental health teams, refer to the MHANDi resource '[Working with a Mental Health Care Team](#)', available on DINER.

How can dietitians best support carers to promote healthier lifestyles?

Dietitians can support carers to maintain adequate nutrition for themselves and the person they care for. In doing so, it is critical that the dietitian:

- Recommend practical strategies and advice, as well as information, to:
 - Achieve optimal nutrition and hydration (as per the Australian Dietary Guidelines)
 - Plan meals that are quick, simple and nutritious while considering budget and available kitchen/food preparation skills
 - Ensure food safety (handling, storage, hygiene)
 - Support healthy lifestyle habits and behaviour change efforts (e.g. using a hunger scale, food and mood diaries to address eating behaviours)
 - Plan healthier go-to options when eating out and ordering takeaway
 - Manage medication side effects, such as dry mouth, constipation, appetite changes, weight gain (for more information, refer to MHANDi resource 'Nutrition Consequences of Psychotropic Medication' available on DINER)
 - Implement any therapeutic and special diets
 - Access nutrition support products, if required
- Act as a nutrition resource and advocate:
 - Provide accurate information and clarify nutrition misinformation and misconceptions
 - Liaise with others as required, including mental health workers and institutional food service staff
 - Support local community health programs (e.g. cooking groups, supermarket tours or community gardens)
- Provide written information and/or action plan, which is appropriate for the carer's literacy level, knowledge regarding the client's mental health condition, access and availability to information, resources and training⁴
- Listen, empathise, communicate in an appropriate and respectful way which acknowledges the role of the carer
- Offer encouragement and support for the carer, as appropriate, and encourage them to recognise any issues affecting them and to seek support (e.g. psychosocial support services) when they need it

Who is caring for the carer?

The Mental Health carer may feel like they are walking a tightrope. Therefore, it is important to develop a natural sense of balance to their care giving routine. Dietitians, whilst working within the scope of practice, can support this balance by encouraging carers to:

- Eat regular, nutritionally balanced meals (as per the Australian Dietary Guidelines)
- Self-monitor signs and symptoms of carer "burnout" including poor physical and mental health such as feeling exhausted and run down, disturbed sleep, over or under eating, frequent headaches and tension, feeling anxious and stressed about small changes, loss of interest and pleasure in usual activities, lack of motivation, poor concentration, procrastination, feelings of hopelessness and helplessness; becoming impatient and irritable; feeling a sense of guilt or shame or doubting your skills and ability to care competently
- Take regular "time out" or breaks to do enjoyable activities such as gardening, cooking, socialising with friends, reading, bush walking;

Other strategies we can encourage them to consider, with appropriate professional support, include:

- Identify need for, and organise respite care
- Make weekly plans which account for the needs of themselves as well as the person being cared for
- Balance expectations – set boundaries and acknowledge limitations
- Prioritise and monitor their own self-care, including regular and adequate sleep, physical activity and social support
- Acknowledge and talk about their feelings

Carers may experience feelings of grief, anxiety, anger, sadness, guilty, overburdened, embarrassment, powerlessness and hopelessness. Provide appropriate referrals to other allied health workers. Collaboration underpins treatment. Keep listening.

Helpful support links for carers:

- Carer Gateway carergateway.gov.au or 1800 422 737
- Carers Australia – search your state for local carer support groups www.carersaustralia.com.au or call 1800 242 636
- Centrelink provide details of benefits and services for family carers www.centrelink.gov.au or call 131 021
- SANE Australia (SANE Help centre 1800 187 263)
- Mental Health Carers Australia <https://www.mentalhealthcarersaustralia.org.au/>

Further reading

MHANDI resources : Links to 2.0 Understanding Nutrition Needs in Mental Health including 2.10 Nutrition Consequences of Psychotropic Medications

National Disability Insurance Scheme:

<https://www.ndis.gov.au/>

A Practical Guide for Working with Carers of People with a Mental Illness (2016): https://mhaustralia.org/sites/default/files/docs/a_practical_guide_for_working_with_carers_of_people_with_a_mental_illness_february.pdf

References

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2. Australian government. Department of Social Services. Disability and Carers. Supporting Carers. Available from: <https://www.dss.gov.au/disability-and-carers/carers>
3. Carers Australia. Available from <http://www.carersaustralia.com.au>
4. Lord K, Livingston G, Cooper C. A systematic review of barriers and facilitators to and interventions for proxy decision-making by family carers of people with dementia. *Int Psychogeriatr.* 2015;27(8):1301-1312.