



Dementia and Family Care

Anne Marie Lee writes on the need for support systems to be in place to allow family members to take up the role of carer to those suffering with dementia. Without support, the health of family carers, who are disproportionately women, is at risk.

Dementia refers to a variety of cognitive impairments causing memory loss, inability to carry out daily tasks and changes in personality. The need for someone to care for this person becomes obvious as their condition gradually deteriorates. The vast majority of family carers are women, with a smaller percentage of husbands and sons taking on the caring role. Many of those carers give up their job or put their career on hold to become family carers. Irish society is still of the belief that it is a daughter's responsibility to look after a parent and if there is an unmarried daughter it is definitely her responsibility!

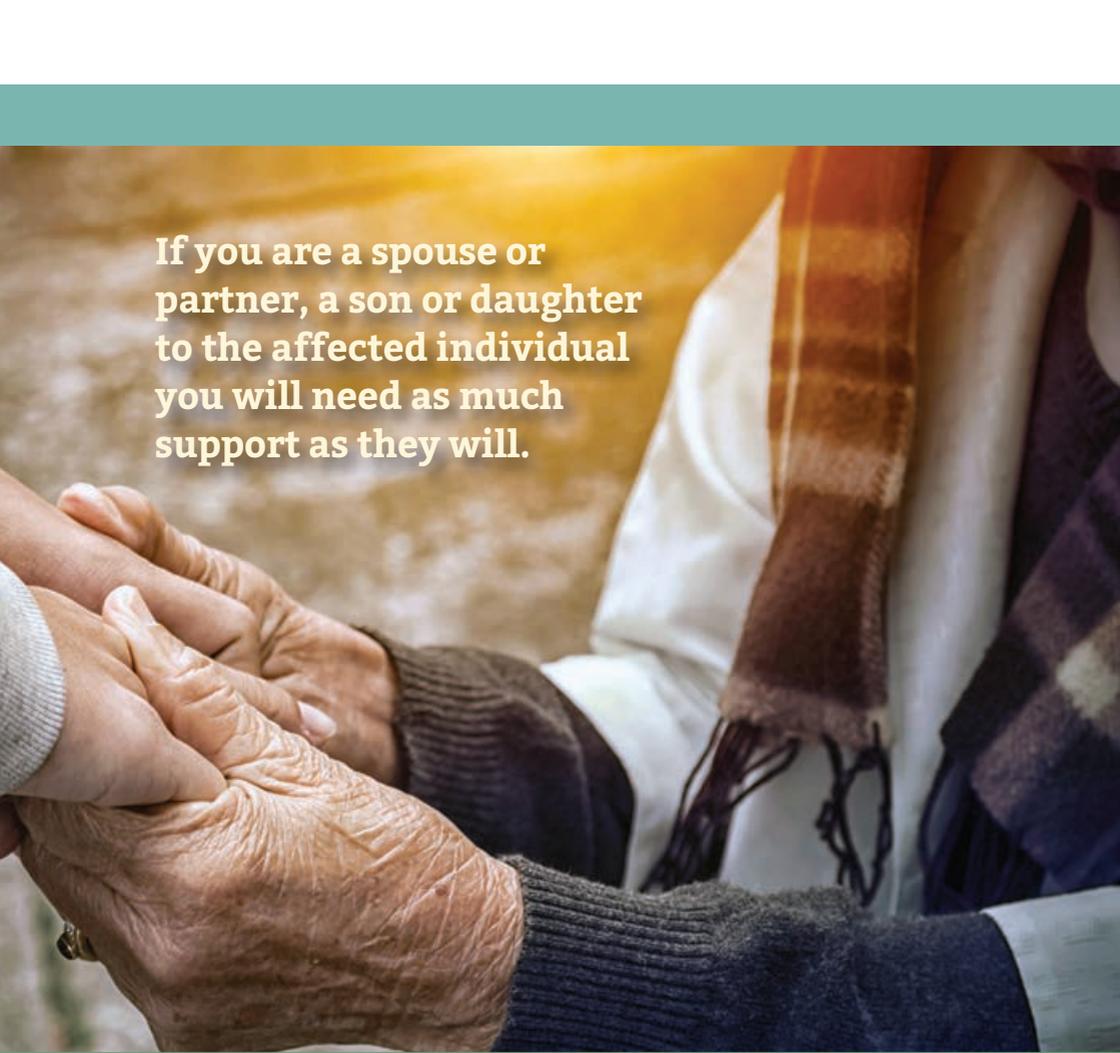
There is no legal responsibility on adult offspring to care for their parents. However, there is a strong moral responsibility to do so. Parents raise all their children equally, for the

most part, and all adult children have equal moral responsibility to care for dependent parents, or see that they are cared for with dignity.

If you are a spouse or partner, a son or daughter to the affected individual you will need as much support as they will. You are looking down a long lonely road unless you ask for help and make use of all the services available to you. Caring for somebody 24/7 without help is not possible, your



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health will suffer.

The caring role can be very isolating because the person with dementia needs constant monitoring as the condition worsens. The carer will experience a total change of lifestyle. She is no longer free to accept a spontaneous invitation to join friends for a meal or a show. There is loss of contact with work colleagues. Friends and neighbours who called in to visit, or to help in some way initially,

gradually drop away. Relatives may keep their distance in case they are asked to give the carer a break.

Being the sole carer is much more difficult than if you are sharing the responsibility with another or others. You have taken on responsibility for the person cared for. If he/she goes out will they find their way back? If left alone will they open the door to strangers who might harm or rob them? Will he/she switch on the gas

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jet and forget to put a match to it? There are so many dangers for a person who has lost the ability to think and reason, they cannot be left alone. This means, if you are a sole carer, you have to be able to call on friends or relatives to sit with the person if you need to go out.

As the condition deteriorates you, the carer, must dress and undress, shower and toilet the person cared for. The time will come when they won't know what to do with the meal that is put in front of them so you will need to feed them. They don't recognise hunger or the need to empty their bladder.

When you took on the role of carer initially, you were full of compassion

and a sense of duty, but no matter how much you love the one cared for, you can become resentful, bitter and utterly frustrated. Your health will begin to deteriorate and you may become depressed. It is for this reason that you must seek whatever help you can get from family, community and the health services, from the beginning. You are to be admired for taking on a noble task, but admiration isn't enough. You must have regular support in order to have a social life, short breaks and holiday breaks, knowing your loved one is safe and well cared for.

The supports should be put in place from the beginning, supports mainly for your benefit. 