

Health issues for families and support workers

People with intellectual disability should be involved in all decisions about their health and wellbeing.

Some people can make decisions alone and some people will need support. It is critical that supporters know the person's will and preferences to make sure the right support is provided and the right decision is made.

Families and support workers often have high levels of stress. Meeting the needs of a person with intellectual disability can be very challenging.

Parents can find it emotionally painful to tell their story again and again to different services. Parents often face pressures from lack of sleep, financial issues and the needs of their other children.

Stress can have a bad effect on your health, both physically and mentally. But there are many ways you can reduce stress and stay healthy. Remember this: you can better care for others if you take care of yourself.

Stress and health

When we are stressed for a long time we can develop illnesses like heart disease, high blood pressure, anxiety or depression. Our immune systems can weaken and we can get more frequent colds.

Parents of a person with intellectual disability often neglect their own health issues because they are focusing on the needs of the person.

Managing stress and staying well

- Keep life as simple as possible.
- Eat well, get enough rest and exercise regularly.
- Be gentle with yourself. Be realistic about what you can do and don't be hard on yourself if you can't do everything. Find time to do something for you!
- Try to keep a positive outlook. Make a list of the good things in your life.
- Think about how you have dealt with other challenges you have faced and see if you can apply any of those strategies to disability related challenges.
- Have regular health checks. Talk to your doctor or a counsellor if you are finding things hard.
- Speak up about the needs of the person you are supporting. You may find it helpful to ask a friend, family member or trained advocate to help with this.

Maintaining social networks

Look after the relationships you have with your partner, children, extended family and friends. Many families become socially isolated. It is important for your health to stay connected with the people you care about, and who care about you. Many people find the new friendships they make through support groups very helpful. Others prefer to spend time with existing friends and family.

Accept offers of help. Most people like to help others when they can.

Parents, especially mothers, often take the role of primary caregiver, and many give up their careers. Others feel that it is worth paying for support workers so they can stay connected with work and the social interaction that comes with it.

Where to go for help and support

Support groups can be great places to share experiences, information and tips. Disability advocacy and information services also provide useful advice and support. GPs can help with advice, referrals to specialists and therapists, and can write letters of support for you to get services and equipment.

With more information and experience, families learn to trust their instincts and feel more confident to deal with issues as they arise.

Issues for support workers and disability managers

The work of a disability support worker is very important but often unappreciated by people who don't understand it.

Value the work you do! It helps to value the people you support, get to know them and celebrate their achievements. Support your colleagues and encourage each other to keep on learning and improving the way you work. Be proud of the difference you make every day to the lives of others.

Managers should develop a supportive team centred around each person with intellectual disability. Encourage your staff to support each other, and make sure they know signs of stress and where to get help.

For more information

You can get information about disability services and advocacy groups from Council for Intellectual Disability and other disability information services.

Carers NSW website
www.carersnsw.org.au

Stress, Better Health Victoria
www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/stress

Stress management website
www.stressmanagement.com.au

This fact sheet was updated in **2019**.

The fact sheet contains general information only and does not take into account individual circumstances. It should not be relied on for medical advice. We encourage you to look at the information in this fact sheet carefully with your health professional to decide whether the information is right for you.