



Australian Government

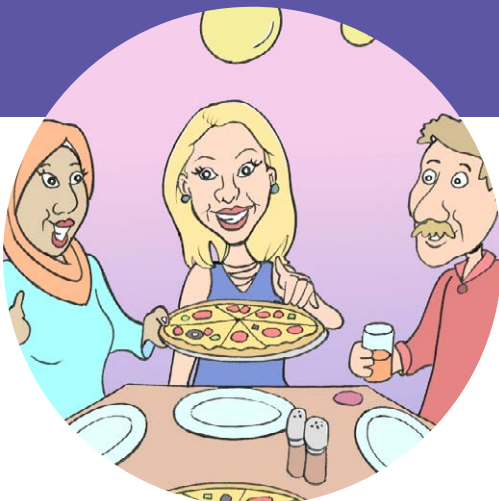


Carer Skills 5:

Social Connections



How long will it take?
15 to 30 minutes



Learning outcomes

In doing this module you will:

- ✓ gain a better understanding of the importance of being socially connected
- ✓ learn how to deal with guilt, fear and anxiety
- ✓ build your social connections map
- ✓ be exposed to some ideas and skills to increase your social connections
- ✓ create your care team
- ✓ build your social connections plan
- ✓ commit to putting your plan into action.



Your wellbeing is important to us.

If you find talking about your experience as a carer upsetting, you may want to talk to someone.

Lifeline 13 11 14 and Beyond Blue 1300 22 4636 are two services that are both available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week if you need support.

Introduction

Carers say caring strengthens their relationship with the person they care for, provides opportunities for personal growth, develop new skills and successfully overcome challenges.

Caring can also be physically and emotionally demanding. Sometimes the daily life of a carer can feel lonely.

Many carers say they feel socially isolated. They can't catch up with family and friends, get out of the house or do things they enjoy as much as they would like.

Research shows that:

- maintaining social connections is important to the sustainability of your caring role
- social connectedness is as good for your health as quitting smoking, regularly exercising or losing weight.

Being socially connected isn't only about being part of a group, whether that's family, friends, neighbours, co-workers or community. It's about:

- creating meaningful relationships where you feel you belong and have a shared understanding
- being exposed to new ideas to create a bigger worldview
- being able to rely on each other.

There are many ways to stay socially connected, such as meeting face-to-face, telephone, texting and through social media.

Carers say they enjoy being socially connected because friends keep them motivated, help them to de-stress and put things into perspective.



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Benefits of being socially connected



Although everyone needs to be on their own from time to time, too much time alone can be harmful. Feeling socially connected, especially in an increasingly busy world, is more important than ever. The benefits of social connectedness shouldn't be ignored. And it can be fun!

The tables below list the benefits of being socially connected and the costs of neglecting to do this.

Benefits of being socially connected	Costs of not being socially connected
1. increased life expectancy	1. shorter life span
2. stronger immune system, which means that you are better able to fight colds, flu and other diseases	2. poorer physical health, increased aches and pains, headaches or worsening of illnesses and medical conditions
3. improved mental health and wellbeing	3. depression and anxiety
4. improved self-worth and confidence	4. low energy or lack of motivation
5. reduced risk of dementia	5. problems sleeping
6. improved sleep, clarity with daily planning and decision-making.	6. poor self-esteem
	7. increased risk of dementia
	8. reduced resilience.



I know I have been neglecting this part of my life for some time now – but it probably started way before I took over Liz' care ... probably more likely since we had the kids. This was a helpful reminder though – I have trouble sleeping, I feel down a lot, irritable and low in energy. I know I need to get back out there ... it just all feels too hard. I'm hoping that this module will help me find new ways to connect – in fact a part of me is looking forward to it.

Megan, (44), mother of two, working full-time and carer to her sister Liz (43) who has Down Syndrome.

Self-evaluation – Do I need to be more socially connected?



People vary in how much socialisation they need. Some people need lots of socialisation and like to socialise in big groups. Others need less socialisation and prefer smaller groups and one-on-ones.

Answer the questions below to determine whether or not you would find this module useful:

- Are you able to take a break from caring to socialise?
- Do you have a strong network of family and friends that you feel comfortable to turn to in times of need?
- Do you often avoid social situations?
- Do you feel anxious when you're socialising?
- Do you feel isolated from other people?
- Do you worry about what others think of you?
- Do you feel inadequate or awkward around other people?
- Do other people seem to have more fun than you in social situations?
- Do you find it hard to approach people or join in conversations?
- Do you often feel bad about yourself after socialising?

If you answered no to the first two questions or yes to one or more of the other questions you could benefit from doing this module.



I find that I'm so busy with caring for my husband and father-in-law that sometimes I don't want to be around other people at all. When I think it through, I've avoided social events for so long now that I feel disconnected, and I don't have anyone to talk to when things get tough for me. I'm there to help everyone, but I have no one to help me.

Mary, 57. Carer to her husband with MS and her father-in-law with dementia.

Why don't I socialise more?



There are many reasons carers find it difficult to be socially connected, including that you:

- put your own needs last
- are too tired to make the effort
- feel guilty or anxious about not being with the person you care for
- juggle multiple demands and responsibilities
- don't feel you have anything in common with other people
- have lost your confidence in your ability to socialise.

Maintaining your social connections can be hard when:

- the person you care for, family or friends may not understand the:
 - practical realities of caring
 - importance to your health and wellbeing of you keeping socially connected
- the person you care for doesn't want outside support while you socialise
- the demands of other family members make it difficult for you to have any time to yourself.

Some carers may feel excluded from social events by friends who:

- make presumptions about their ability to attend
- haven't thought about making adjustments to make it easier for them to attend.



Other carers may find the strain of the forward planning needed to attend events makes them reluctant to socialise.

Finding alternative care services may be challenging when:

- you do not know what services are available, or how to get help organising it
- there is a lack of services in your area
- the costs of some types of care could be outside your budget
- you have concerns about the quality of some types of care.

Why don't I socialise more?



There are loads of reasons. I feel so tired at the end of the day that I can't be bothered socialising. Also, we live in a small town. I know to begin with I'll feel guilty socialising without Cathy but I know that when I get past that spending time connecting with friends will make me a happier person and a better carer.

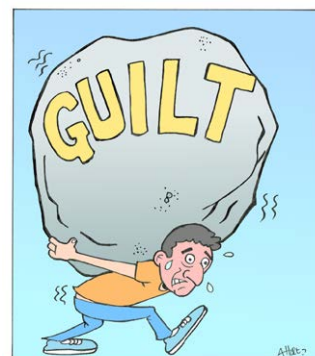
Jessica (37) lives in a remote community and is a carer to her friend Cathy (63) with heart disease, retinopathy and an amputation.

Dealing with guilt, fear and anxiety

It is quite common for carers to feel guilty or worry about being away from the person they care for. Many carers worry that something could go wrong when someone else cares for the person they care for.

The first step is to recognise you're having these feelings. The second step is to work through your feelings:

- ease your guilt by reminding yourself that:
 - while feeling guilty is normal, it is not helpful so practise letting go of these feelings
 - being socially connected is not only good for you, it is also good for the person you care for because it gives them opportunities to socialise and have new experiences
- deal with your fear that something could go wrong by:
 - developing a care plan to help your paid carer or family care for the person you care for in your absence
 - carefully choosing alternate care and support arrangements
 - starting small by only being away for a short time until the respite arrangements are running smoothly
- overcome your anxiety by:
 - knowing you are not alone, many carers feel anxious about leaving the person they care for
 - writing down the things you are most worried might happen, work out the likelihood of those happening and developing a plan for how you could reduce the likelihood of those events happening
 - talking to a friend, another carer or counsellor.



I'm still coming to terms with dad being in a nursing home. 'We' decided to put dad in there so I feel like it's 'our' obligation to not leave him alone in there. So, I was talking to my sister and we recently made a schedule of who will visit dad and when. Since doing this I've been less worried about him being lonely, and I've noticed I do not feel as guilty anymore.

George (49), carer to his father Rafael (75) with depression, diabetes and vascular dementia.

Your social connections map



We all need friends. They help you feel good about yourself and are especially helpful when you need support. They help you celebrate joyful moments and accept you the way you are, warts and all.

It is good to have to a range of friends because they can provide you with different kinds of friendship and support. One friend can't meet all your friendship needs.

To map out your different kinds of friendships, start by making a list of the people in your life, including neighbours and co-workers.

Completing the map will help you:

- recognise the important relationships you have
- identify which relationships you want to invest more effort into
- help identify any gaps.

Draw seven circles and fill in the names, using the explanations below for each of the circles:

1. you
2. spouse/partner
3. parents/siblings/family
4. best friends
5. good friends
6. friends and acquaintances
7. other connections.



Your social connections map



Put yourself in the first circle. The next three circles are the people you are closest to, those you love and who love you.

The fifth circle is for people you enjoy hanging out with, but who you may not confide in.

The sixth circle includes people you frequently interact with but are not your good friends. People you say hi to, share a laugh, talk about your day or share something new in your life. This is a fluid group who will move in and out of your life. They are people:

- who live in your community
- you know through clubs, groups and associations
- you see at work
- you know through social media.

The seventh circle is for people you have other connections with, for example doctors, hairdresser, service providers and shop assistants.

The next few pages will give you some suggestions about how you can deepen existing relationships that are important to you and fill any gaps you identified.

A social connections map tool has been included in the additional resources.



This exercise took me a little by surprise. Until now, I hadn't really stopped to think how small my inner circles had become. I lost a lot of family support and friendships in the divorce, not only because my family is not nearby but probably because I have been focused on supporting the kids. I have no regrets – the kids needed me. However, now that I can see the gaps, I know I need to do something to reconnect and deepen some of my relationships.

Cheryl (56), carer and parent to her son, Daniel (33), who abuses substances and her daughter, Lily (29), who has generalised anxiety disorder.

Ideas to increase your social connectedness

Carers are often so busy that they have lost their social connections. There are many ways to get socially connected.

Connect with family and friends

Staying in regular contact with family and friends is important for carers to stay socially connected. If your family don't live nearby, technology is a good way to stay in touch. Telephone, email, text messaging, video-conferencing and social networking sites are great ways to stay connected.

Getting out and about

It's important to regularly get out and about. Visit family and friends, attend social functions, go shopping (even better if it's with a friend), go for a picnic or BBQ, or take the dog for a walk.

Getting involved in your community

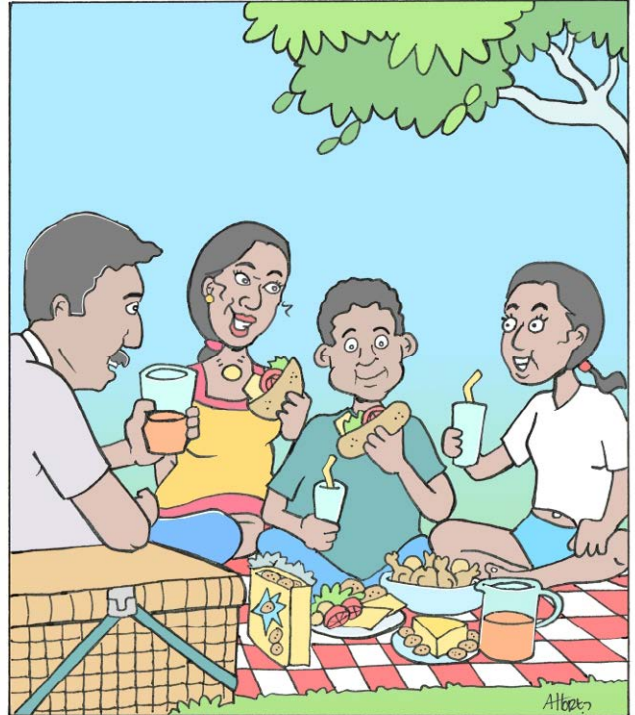
Join a local community group, for example church, local progress association or environmental group, Rotary or Lions.

Going to community events

Keep an eye out for upcoming community events through your local media, library or community centre.

Special interest groups and clubs

Joining a special interest group or club is a great way to meet like-minded people or learn a new skill. For example, fishing, sewing, craft, bushwalking, men's shed, darts, choir, band, car or motorcycle, dancing and public speaking.



Connecting with other carers

Join a carer support group through:

- your state or territory carer association
- groups aimed at a specific illness or condition, for example dementia, cancer, or physical or intellectual disability
- groups which cater for your religious or cultural background
- groups catering to your situation, for example groups for parents, grandparents or young carers.

These groups provide an opportunity to make new friends, offer practical and emotional support and shared experiences.

Ideas to increase your social connectedness



Getting active

Join an exercise class or a local sports team, head to the gym, go walking or running with a friend, take up yoga.

Get a pet

Pets can be great companions. They are great conversation starters and can improve your and the person you care for's physical and mental health.

Social media, including online gaming

Online social contact can be a good alternative for people to attend social events who might otherwise be unable to. For example, carers, people living in rural and remote areas, those with mobility issues or low income. Research shows that social media can be a good way to connect with groups, particularly with those who share common interests.

The additional resources includes links to two websites which provide:

- information about how to protect yourself online
- up-to-date information on the latest online threats and how to respond to them.

Once you get to know your online friends a bit you could invite them to meet in-person.

High res social connections tool

The Department of Veterans' Affairs developed a step-by-step tool to help people build social connections. The tool takes 5 to 10 minutes to complete; helps people build a social connections map; and gives ideas for activities. The link to the website is included in the additional resources.



Meetup groups

Meetup is an online service used to create groups that host local in-person events. There are Meetup groups all over the world and people use them to find new friends, share a hobby, socialise or for professional networking. Look online for your local Meetup groups.

Start a Meetup group

Starting your own carers Meetup group is a great way to meet new people. Meetup meetings can be held anywhere: at a private home, café, church or community hall, in a park etc.

Carers New Zealand developed a Meetups toolkit to help carers organise their own Meetup groups. The link to the toolkit is included in the additional resources.

Ideas to increase your social connectedness



Weekly and monthly social activities

Use the template below to plan your weekly social activities. You may find regular commitments can be easier to organise.

When developing your plan, think about the different ways you can stay connected, for example face-to-face, either in-person or video-conferencing, telephone, texting and social media. You could catch up for coffee or lunch, start up your own carers Meetup, join an interest group or club or attend social events.

Also think about:

- important relationships you'd like to strengthen such as your partner, children, parents, siblings and close friends
- people you would like to spend time with, for example neighbours, work colleagues and your community
- people or groups you can share experiences with.

Day/Time	Activity/Who with	Replacement care

Use the template below to plan your monthly recharging.

Day/Time	Activity/Who with	Replacement care

My social skills are rusty

1

If you've been so busy with the person you care for that it's been a while since you socialised, you may not be feeling confident about your social skills.

You're not alone, many people feel awkward and nervous in social situations. It is also common for people to feel nervous doing something they haven't done in a while.

Here are some tips for improving your social skills.

Start small

Take small steps towards being more confident and social and build on those successes. For example, rather than attending a large social event where you don't know anyone, arrange to have coffee with a friend you haven't seen in a while.

Reconnect with your old buddies

Contact your old friends, colleagues and acquaintances. You could say something like "I was watching/thinking about (something related to them/their hobbies) when I remembered you. Let's get together sometime this week/month."

Prioritise your social life

Stop saying no to, and start accepting, invitations. Plan catch-ups with acquaintances you'd like to get to know better. This will give you an opportunity to improve your social skills.

Talk to everyone

If you are rusty or nervous about starting conversations, practise talking to people you meet. Saying "Hello, how are you today?" to the



person at the grocery checkout can help you become more comfortable starting conversations at social events.

Listen well

Listen well by asking questions and really listening to the answers, rather than waiting for a turn to talk. Pay attention to non-verbal cues. This approach also makes you appear more confident. A link to resources on active listening and non-verbal communication are included in the additional resources.

Socialise with a friend

If you feel nervous, ask a friend with good social skills to go to a social event with you.

My social skills are rusty

1

Think positive

Don't overthink or dwell on how you are perceived. Shift your focus to the other person or the topic of conversation.

Learn to handle failure

Everyone feels rejected occasionally. Socially confident people don't take rebuffs personally. They don't think they are unlikeable or can't make friends. They assume it was incompatibility, someone else's bad mood or a misunderstanding.

Self-assured people are resilient. They say things like "Can we catch-up next week instead?" or they move on to another group.

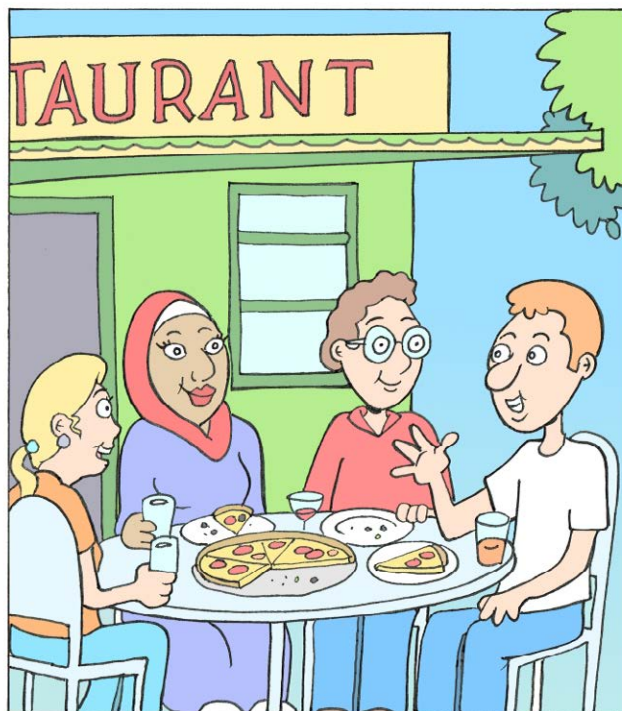
Don't take yourself too seriously

Try not to be offended by little things or feel the need to defend yourself if someone says something negative about you. Remember you can't control other people's opinions. People are usually teasing or trying to make a joke and the trick is to laugh it off.

Practice your social skills

Invest time in honing your social skills. Don't be discouraged.

Remember that social connections are good for you and the more you socialise the easier it will become.



Sue wants me to get back out into the social scene, but I just don't feel right going without her. She was always the 'life of the party' and I always just tagged along. I know it's important though, and so I'm trying to start small ... sparking up a conversation with the postman and shopkeepers in town. I'm totally out of my comfort zone and feel awkward ... but it's a start and I'm going to keep trying.

James (70) lives in a rural area and is a carer to his wife, Sue, (68) who experienced a stroke this year.

Creating your care team

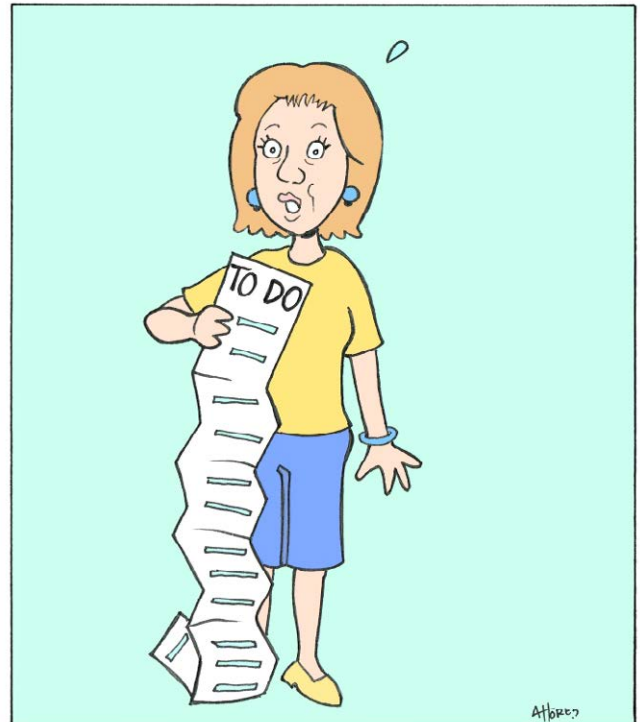


Caring shouldn't be a one-person show. Creating a care team for you and the person you care for will benefit you both. It will also be a rewarding experience for all members of your team.

Often people don't offer support because:

- from the outside, it looks like you've got everything under control
- they don't know how to help
- they may be scared of doing a bad job.

The first step is to develop a "job list" of tasks and activities which other people can do to help, and keep the list up to date. Then use the template below to build your care team. You might be surprised at how much potential support there is around you and the person you care for.



Creating your care team



Family members

Family members can be a great backup. Think about which members of your extended family could help. You could ask them to do a specific task on your job list. For example, spending time with your loved one while you have coffee with a friend or taking your loved one on an outing while you have some time to yourself.

Even family members who live a long way away can contribute, for example by making medical appointments, regularly contacting your loved one (via telephone or video conferencing), paying bills electronically etc. List your family members who you will ask for support along with a task or activity.

Family member	Task/activity	Frequency

Friends

Your friends and the friends of the person you care for may be able to help. You could ask a friend to do a task and see how the request is received. List the friends that you can approach along with a suggested task or activity.

Friend	Task/activity	Frequency

Creating your care team



Neighbours

Neighbours can be a good source of support. Perhaps you can do something for a neighbour in return for some help with caring. List the neighbours you think can help along with a suggested task or activity for each person.

Neighbour	Task/activity	Frequency

Other options

Other carers and peer support groups can be a great source of support because they are in a similar situation to you. Depending on the circumstances, you could swap care or do odd jobs for each other. List the other carers you know who might be in a position to help.

Church, social groups and clubs are another potential source of support. Think about the various groups of people that you and the person you care for are involved with who might be able to help and list them below.

Person/organisation	Task/activity	Frequency

Creating your care team



Paid in-home and out-of-home care

The following types of respite services are available:

- in-home respite – a care worker provides care in the home or may organise to take the person you care for on an outing
- centre-based respite – held at a centre or club that organises group activities for the person you care for, allowing them to meet other people
- community access respite – provides activities to encourage a sense of independence in the person you care for, allowing them to meet other people.

The costs of these services will depend on your circumstances and those of the person you care for. Further information about these types of care is available under additional resources on page 19.

Depending on your circumstances and those of the person you care for, you could be eligible for:

- transport – taking the person you care for to and from appointments or on social outings
- domestic support – housework, personal care, gardening, odd jobs or repairs
- food services – shopping, food preparation or providing pre-cooked meals.

Further information about these types of care is available in the additional resources.

Once you have worked out which options apply to your circumstances, list them below.

Person/organisation	Task/activity	Frequency

Creating your care team



It's a work in progress, but I've made a list of things that dad needs help with and have tried to organise more people to help.

I've built an online calendar for us all to use so we can see when dad needs help. Being an online calendar, everyone can see where they can help and, most importantly, dad knows who and what to expect every day.

I've also set up a transport service to help get dad out and about, and "Meals on Wheels" to deliver meals to his home.

I'm hoping that with all of this set up dad might be able to continue living independently, and I get some time back to get on with my life – fingers crossed!

Renee (22) carer to her father (48) with schizophrenia.

Building your social connections plan

You have identified your care team and planned your weekly and monthly social activities. Use the steps below to develop your social connections plan.

Step 1

Talk to the people you identified in the last section as having the capacity to support you.

You may want to get some tips from the “Effective communication techniques” module before you do this. A resource has been developed about how family and friends can help.

Step 2

Arrange the paid in-home and out-of-home care you identified in the last section.

These services can sometimes have waiting lists so it is best to book early.

Step 3

Put together a care plan, including a daily activity sheet for the person you care for.

If possible, do this activity with the person you care for. Templates are included in the resources.

Step 4

Prepare the person you care for.

If possible, involve the person you care for in the planning. You both may feel reluctant to spend time apart but reassure the person you care for that it will be good for them too.



It will give them:

- an opportunity to meet new people
- opportunities to experience new activities
- memories to look back on
- something to look forward to
- a change of scenery
- a good feeling because you are refreshed and have more energy.

Building your social connections plan



Enjoy your outing

At first you might find it hard to leave the person you care for. Stay calm and try not to draw out the goodbyes. Remind yourself about the benefits for you both.

While you're away try to switch off and enjoy yourself.

Review your plan

After your outing review your plan. Have a think about how the alternative care arrangements worked. You may need to refine your plan. Involve the person you care for so you can deal with any problems together.

Remember that other people do things differently to you. This doesn't mean their way is wrong, it could be good for the person you care for to experience different ways of caring.

If the care arrangements didn't work out, look for an alternative. Don't give up.



Some of these steps came naturally to me. But, what I found particularly helpful was thinking through how to prepare Ivy. This included talking to her about how this would be a good experience for both of us. I have also asked her to help me review the plan as we go – she was pretty happy with the idea that she gets to have a say and that we can work on the plan together to make sure we are both enjoying our time apart.

Joanna (57) started caring for her friend, Ivy (79) with heart disease, breast cancer and suspected cognitive impairment. Joanna lives with her husband Rob (66).

Putting your plan into action

The most common tips experienced carers have for new carers are to:

- prioritise their own health and wellbeing
- take time to stay socially connected.

In the beginning it may take some time and effort to organise time to regularly socialise. Remind yourself that it will be worthwhile in the end.

When you're putting your plan into action:

- spend time with positive people who will encourage you to regularly socialise
- say yes to offers to socialise
- say no if your days become overloaded (a resource is included in additional resources)
- think twice before taking on extra commitments – you are already doing enough, if not too much
- start small and build up
- let others help.

Make “me” time a priority. Remind yourself that:

- the person you care for will soon get used to the new routine
- you are a team and you both have needs that need attention.

Be prepared for little things to go wrong.

Whatever happens you or the alternate carer will manage it.

Celebrate your successes, even the small successes. Be kind to yourself if the plan didn't go quite as you had hoped. Sometimes plans need refining.

Don't forget to review your plan. You can redo the module as often as you want.



I know I need to get better at scheduling in 'me' time ... it's a work in progress. I have started with regular exercise, a weekly yoga class, and a weekly brunch with friends. So far, so good ... although the weather last week got in the way of my running group and as a result I felt the difference in my mood. So, I've decided I need to work on a 'social contact back-up plan'.

Sally (34), carer to her mother Joan (62) with pancreatic cancer.

Additional resources



The following resources/tool have been developed:

- Social connections map tool.
(See page 26)
- How family and friends can help
(See Carer Skills 3: Recharge and reconnect)
- Daily routine template
(See Carer Skills 3: Recharge and reconnect)
- Learning to say 'no'
(See Carer Skills 3: Recharge and reconnect)
- Active listening
- Non-verbal communication
(See Carer Skills 2: Effective communication techniques)
- Mastering small talk

Carer Gateway

- General respite information:
 - What is respite care
<https://www.carergateway.gov.au/what-is-respite-care>
 - Who can get respite
<https://www.carergateway.gov.au/who-can-get-respite>
 - Respite at home
<https://www.carergateway.gov.au/respite-at-home>
- Keeping your social networks
<https://www.carergateway.gov.au/keeping-your-social-networks>
- Connecting with other carers
<https://www.carergateway.gov.au/connecting-with-other-carers>
- Connecting with other young carers
<https://www.carergateway.gov.au/connecting-with-other-young-carers>

Other resources

- Stay smart online
<https://www.staysmartonline.gov.au/>
- Keeping kids safe online starts with you
<https://www.esafety.gov.au/>
- Department of Veterans' Affairs Highres social connections tool
<https://highres.dva.gov.au/highres/#!/tools/social-connection>
- New Zealand Carers' Meetups Toolkit
http://carers.net.nz/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Carers_NZ_Carers_MeetUps_3-0.pdf

Congratulations



Congratulations!

You've completed the social connections module!



Learning summary

Having completed the social connections module you should now:

- ✓ have a better understanding of the importance of social connections
- ✓ know how to deal with guilt, fear and anxiety
- ✓ have developed your social connections map
- ✓ be familiar with a range of ideas and skills to increase your social connections
- ✓ have created your care team
- ✓ have developed your social connections plan
- ✓ have developed your social connections plan.

Social connections map



SOCIAL CONNECTIONS MAP

COMPLETE YOUR SOCIAL CONNECTIONS MAP BY WRITING NAMES IN THE CIRCLES ACCORDING TO THE IMPACT THEY HAVE ON YOUR LIFE !

