

Thinking about the balance in your life as it is NOW:

Read through the questions below and use the boxes and spaces provided to write down your thoughts.

How often do you get a break from caring?

	Twice a week or more?
	About once a week
	Less than once a week?

If you are getting a break less than once a week, it probably isn't enough. For your own emotional health you need some time to yourself. It's worth thinking about and having a chat with your own Carers Organisation to find out more about services and schemes that can support you.

Here are some responses from carers, are any of them similar to yours?

How did you become a carer?

	<i>The only alternative was residential care and I just couldn't do that.</i>
	<i>I never considered doing anything else – she's my wife and I love her.</i>
	<i>It seemed the right thing to do at the time – now I'm not so sure.</i>
	<i>I was reluctant to take on caring for my Dad and I still am.</i>
	<i>I don't see myself as a carer – there was no one else so I felt it was my duty.</i>



Your thoughts...

Like most people, you've probably found caring at times a challenge, but feel satisfied in knowing you are making a very real difference to the life of the person you care for. It can change relationships though, not just with the person you care for but with other family members.

For a few carers it may not seem like a choice. They may well feel like 'victims of circumstance'. Or maybe the decision to care seemed right at the time and now it feels very difficult as time has gone by.

Whatever the reason, if the caring role is making you and the cared for unhappy, it's a good idea to have a chat with your Carers Organisation to see what either what alternative arrangements can be made or to enable you to take a step back and find some ways to be happier.

Do you share care with other family members or do you have all the responsibility?

	<i>There aren't any close relatives so I just get on with it.</i>
	<i>The rest of the family do help out sometimes – but only when I ask them to.</i>
	<i>It's not something I've ever thought about – it's what I do and I've never really considered involving anyone else.</i>
	<i>We get together and talk about how things are going quite regularly. I get things off my chest. When lots of things need doing we try and spread the load between us.</i>
	<i>We've never really talked about it as a family. I wouldn't know how to raise it with them and I don't think they'd want to know.</i>

Your thoughts...

Caring for someone can change family life. It can strengthen family ties and equally weaken them. Recognising these pressures and talking about them honestly can help. It's never too late to start talking.

If you don't have family help, then chat to your Carers Organisation who can provide a listening ear and help to look at solutions.

Would you consider asking for outside help?

	<i>I could do with some help but the person I look after won't accept</i>
	<i>I don't think anyone else would do things as well as I do.</i>
	<i>I'd feel as if I'd failed if I had to ask some for help.</i>
	<i>I've no problem asking for help, you just need to keep on asking.</i>
	<i>I would expect the GP or Practice nurse to suggest it if they thought we needed it.</i>

Your thoughts...

Most of us find it hard to ask for help if it isn't offered. Carers on the other hand need to be assertive and ask for it to get some reasonable balance to their lives. If you don't get the help you need to assist you to keep going, your role as a carer can have an effect on your long term health and wellbeing.

So think about asking for help with specific tasks from family, friends and neighbours. Chat to your Carers Organisation and make sure you have a Carer's Assessment.

How much of your life is taken up by caring?

	<i>I feel that most of my time is controlled by the needs of others.</i>
	<i>I make time to go out one evening a week – I couldn't manage if I didn't.</i>
	<i>I've kept on working because it gives me an outlet from caring, it helps me to manage.</i>
	<i>I try to make time for the rest of the family when I can.</i>
	<i>The person I care for gets very distressed when I'm not there.</i>

Your thoughts...

Being a carer can put limits on what you do outside this role. Coming to terms with this loss of 'ordinary life' (whatever that is for you!), can be one of the hardest aspects of being a carer. Recognising these limits can assist in helping to readjusting to a new balance in life. It means you can think more realistic in the choices you have available. You can make choices about how you organise caring, how you feel about it, how to organise your own support (emotional, social and practical). Making sometime for your other roles in life can make the pressures of caring that little bit easier.

Keeping a diary:

We all have 24 hours in the day; the difference in getting a balance is seeing how we use it. Sometimes taking a step back can help us access what is really taking up our time and what we need to change in order to achieve a balance.

Use the chart below to record what you did for a week, how long it took and any comments from this awareness raising exercise. You may start this on any day.

Day	Morning	Afternoon	Evening	Night
Monday				
Tuesday				
Wednesday				
Thursday				
Friday				
Saturday				
Sunday				

When you've kept a record for a week, you could add up the total number of hours you spent on each activity during the week. Here is a list of possible activities and tasks suggested below with additional columns for you to add your own. This information can also be useful when you are having a conversation to assess needs via the Carer's Assessment and Attendance Allowance.

Activity	Total hours each week
Housework (cooking, cleaning, shopping...)	
Caring and nursing (dealing with professionals, form filling)	
Personal care of myself	
Care of other family members (children)	
Paid work	
Sports or leisure activities	
Social activities (own)	
Social activities (with person I care for)	
Relaxation (TV, reading, music)	
Community activities (church, voluntary activities)	

Planning for the unexpected:

Having adequate breathing space is just as important as having a full week. It enables you to deal with the unexpected more easily. Therefore, having a back-up plan can be very helpful as you'll be able to manage without it becoming a crisis.

The better the balance in your life, the safer you'll feel and the more likely you'll be able to feel in control of your situation rather than it controlling you.

There may be some parts of your routine that are fixed, for example taking of medication at set times or other areas if the person you care for feels reassured by a set routine.

But if the aim is to fit in more of what you want to do amongst the things you have to do, you may find it useful to start thinking about which parts of your routine could be done differently. Maybe it's about different people, different times or in a different way.

Liz's ideas for a better balance



"Chris is quite wobbly on his feet and likes me to be with him when he gets in and out of the bath. I'm wondering if we could change the bath layout or get some aids such as bath seats, grab rails and slip resistant mat for the bath and shower? That way, Chris could do more things for himself.

I walk to the shops three times a week to buy food when really I could be going for a walk somewhere nicer and take Chris with me too. So, I'm going to ask my daughter to help me set up food shopping on the internet.

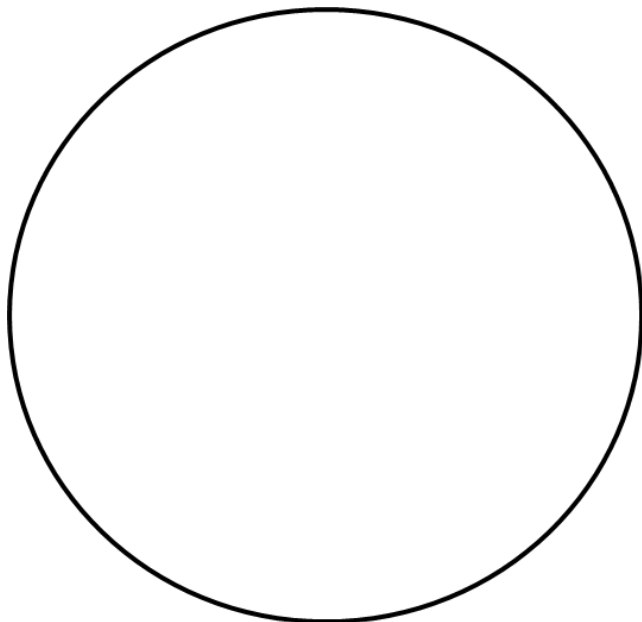
I like a clean house and I spend each day spending time somewhere in the house with my duster. Now that I come to think about it, who am I cleaning for? That time could be spent more productively on me – perhaps going to yoga classes that take place at the village hall over the road once a week."

What can I change?

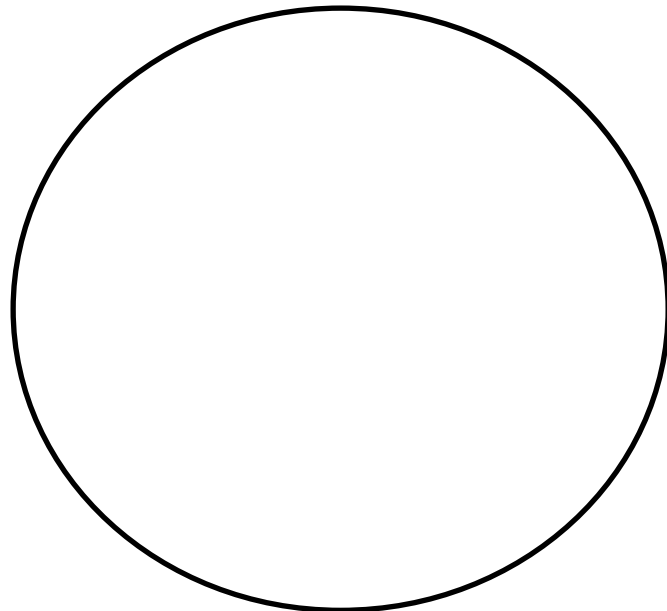
Using the two circles below, list the things in the left circle as all the things you have to do in your caring role (washing, cooking, toileting, showering) plus another routine household tasks (the school run, dogs for a walk).

In the right circle, list all things you'd like to do. You decide what they are.

Things I have to do..



Things I would like to do..



You may notice that the two circles are not balanced. So, is there anything you can do to lighten the load and reduce the number of things you have to do? Therefore, making more space for things you want to do.

Draw a line underneath those things that can be moved or reduced in the left circle. You may also find it easier to leave this exercise for a day or two and see what comes to mind.

Once you start looking at your daily routine with a critical eye, more opportunities may unfold. Giving you quality time for you and the person you care for.