

# How to deal with difficult news about your family member

## When your family member's health changes

A phone call may be the first notice you receive that your family member's condition has changed. The news may come as a shock, although it may not be entirely unexpected - you may find it difficult to gather your thoughts and make decisions. Here are some prompts:

1. Gather the information you need. Perhaps talk to:
  - the person in-charge at the residential care facility;
  - your family member's GP; or
  - the treating doctor, if in hospital.Gain a clear picture of:
  - the current health status of your family member;
  - the difficulties they are facing;
  - the treatment options available; and
  - the likely diagnosis and/or prognosis.
2. Provide necessary information including:
  - relevant health or medical details; and
  - any legal orders in place like Enduring Powers of Attorney or living wills.

*"When I didn't get the answers from the hospital doctor I phoned our GP. Between them, I pieced it all together."*

## Choose the role you wish to have

Your role at this time may include:

- Being the main contact person for the doctor or hospital.
- Being with your family member if they are transferred.
- Being present during assessments or doctors' visits.
- Staying with your family member through the night.
- Participating in the care of your family member, where possible.
- Speaking up on behalf of your family member and their needs.
- Keeping family and friends updated.
- Making necessary arrangements.

Choose the role you wish to have and direct your energy into this. Allow family and friends to support you with other tasks.

Each person copes with uncertainty, grief and loss in different ways - having a task to do can assist those who like to keep busy. At the same time, they will be doing something helpful for you and your family member.



## How emotions affect your thinking and decision making

Carers talk of going through great swells of emotion when dealing with difficult news about their family member. This often includes shock, uncertainty and fear, all of which can have a significant impact on thinking and decision making.

Some carers remember having difficulties with:

- ▣ thinking clearly
- ▣ remembering information
- ▣ communicating clearly
- ▣ knowing what to ask
- ▣ making decisions.

*"I just couldn't think straight.  
My son Tony was there to help me make decisions."*

They now offer the following advice:

- ▣ Don't try to deal with this on your own. Allow others to help.
- ▣ Before speaking to the doctor, write a list of questions.
- ▣ When receiving information take notes - or ask someone with you to do this.
- ▣ Take time to consider the options and what is in the best interests of your family member.
- ▣ Talk to someone about how you're feeling - perhaps an understanding friend who is not immediately involved.
- ▣ Contact the [Commonwealth Carer Resource Centre](#) on 1800 242 636\* for information and support. They can also put you in contact with the National Carer Counselling Program, which can be of great help.

### Further information:

- ▣ [National Carer Counselling Program](#) - brochure.
- ▣ [When a change in facility might be needed](#) - information sheet.

Contact the [Commonwealth Carer Resource Centre](#) on 1800 242 636\* to request the above information sheet be sent to you - or to find out about other information sheets in this series.

\*Free call except from mobile phones. Mobile calls at mobile rates.

We do our best to keep these links up to date, but the internet changes all the time. If you can no longer access any of the above resources, please go to our [Internet Troubleshooting Guide](#), or email us at [website@carersvic.org.au](mailto:website@carersvic.org.au)