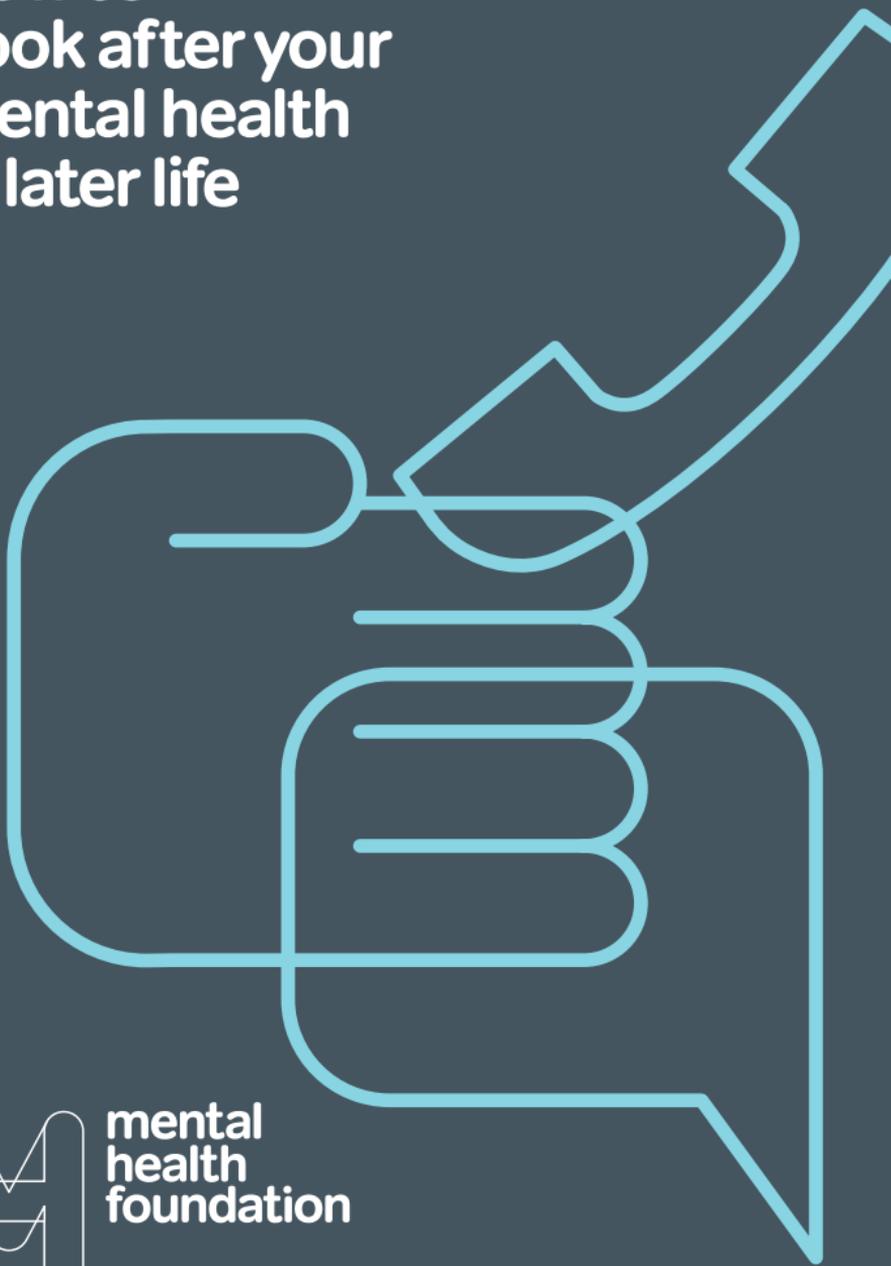


How to Look after your mental health in later life



mental
health
foundation

Some people think
that mental health
problems are simply
part of getting older.
This doesn't have
to be the case.

We have produced this booklet for people in their 60s who are approaching retirement or who have recently retired from work. During this big change it's important to take care of ourselves mentally as well as physically.

We can protect our mental health, and this booklet suggests 10 practical ways to do this.

What is mental health?

Our mental health is about how we think and feel, our outlook on life and how we are able to cope with life's ups and downs. It's an essential part of our health. Some people prefer to call mental health 'emotional health' or 'wellbeing' and it's just as important as good physical health.

If you're in good mental health, you can:

- Make the most of your potential.**
- Cope better with life which may change as we become older, such as being a carer for a loved one**
- Play a full part in our life with our family, friends and community**

About one in four of us has a mental health problem at some point in our life and older people may have a greater risk of developing depression and dementia.

Most of us go through times when we feel down. Lots of life's events can trigger anxiety or depression – the death of a loved one, starting retirement or ongoing health issues are a few examples. Mostly we are able to cope with those feelings. But everyone is different. A minor setback for one person can be a long-term burden for another.

Research shows that there are five key issues that can have an impact on the mental wellbeing of older people:

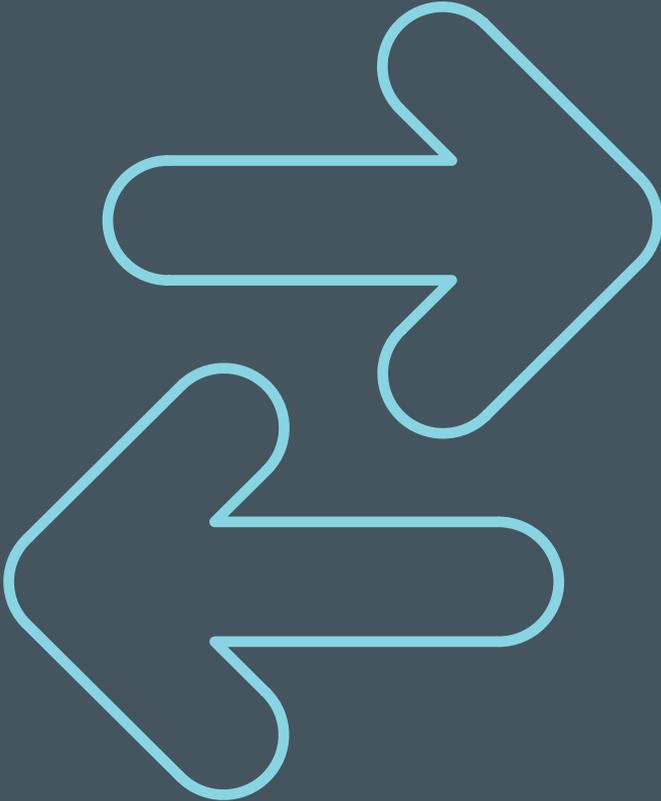
- Discrimination
- Participation in meaningful activities
- Relationships
- Physical health
- Poverty

Even though there are laws in place to help with some of these issues, for instance the Equality Act addresses age discrimination, you may feel that you can't influence society-wide problems like pensioner poverty. However, as an individual there is a lot you can do to protect your own mental wellbeing.

Throughout this booklet you can find references to where to get both help and advice.

Read on for 10 practical ways to help you stay mentally well.

Getting older and retirement
can involve a change in lifestyle



01 Be prepared for changes

Getting older and retirement both
involve a change in lifestyle for most
people.

Ready to retire?

Not everyone feels ready to retire at
the same time. If you want, or need,
to keep working after you reach 65
discuss this with your employer.
Or you may see this as an opportunity
to find a new, perhaps part-time, job.

- The law is evolving in this
area so follow the links in
the ‘Employment’ section of
www.gov.uk for current
information
- If you think you experience age
discrimination, organisations
such as Age UK and Acas can
offer advice and help
(see page 56 onwards)

Still busy

Being retired (or semi-retired) can be a busy life. Friends and family can have plans for your time, anything from child care to DIY tasks. Make time for your own interests. This can be a chance to try a new activity or learn new skills, like using the internet or dancing the tango.

Sense of purpose

If your work or career is a major part of your life, consider how to deal with changes to:

- The social aspect of your life if your job also provided friendships
- Your sense of self-worth and self-esteem if you felt valued at work
- Your financial security

If you haven't had interests outside work it can be hard to 'find something new to do' and it may take a few attempts before you hit on something that's right for you. What skills do you possess that can be put to good use and give you fulfilment? Perhaps helping out with a local community organisation or doing conservation work.

With others

Social interaction is important for maintaining your wellbeing. If you are used to sharing life's ups and downs with others at work, keep up friendships once you retire. Also look to develop new friendships with people of all ages. Others who are your age are great sounding boards for dealing with the challenges of retirement. Friendships with older and younger people help keep you in touch with the world as it changes.

See also '03 – Ask for Help' on page 19.

Misconceptions

Some people do have mental health problems, such as dementia or memory loss, as they get older, but it isn't an inevitable part of old age. If you think you are developing a mental health problem, talk to your GP as there are treatments available. Remember, becoming forgetful doesn't mean you have dementia!

Many organisations depend on the skills and experience that older people possess. Don't dismiss volunteering as for 'do-gooders'; many people can tell you it's an essential part of getting work experience. Volunteering can even be good for your health.

See page 61 for information on finding volunteering opportunities near you.

It's not always easy to describe how you're feeling. If you can't think of one word, use lots.



02 Talk about problems and concerns

Managing problems, difficulties and worries becomes easier if we talk about our concerns. It's a good way to rationalise our thoughts and make sense of a situation or how we feel. It can make us feel supported and not alone.

Who to talk to

Who you want to talk with depends on what's worrying you. You could try:

- Friends and family - they are usually understanding
- Someone with specialist knowledge, perhaps financial planning experience if you are struggling to meet the bills
- An impartial person, for instance for concerns about care for your partner
- A person who promises confidentiality

There are suggestions about who to talk with in '03 Ask for Help' (see page 19).

Say what you feel

Talking about problems and concerns doesn't mean you have to discuss your emotions, or lay bare how you feel. Some people do find this helpful, while others prefer to keep conversation on a practical level. Talking about how you feel, or your feelings, isn't a sign of weakness; it's about taking charge of your wellbeing.

Listen and learn

Having a chat is never a one-way street. Sharing your thoughts can help others find the courage to talk about their problems. If you don't want to talk about yourself, ask others how they feel.

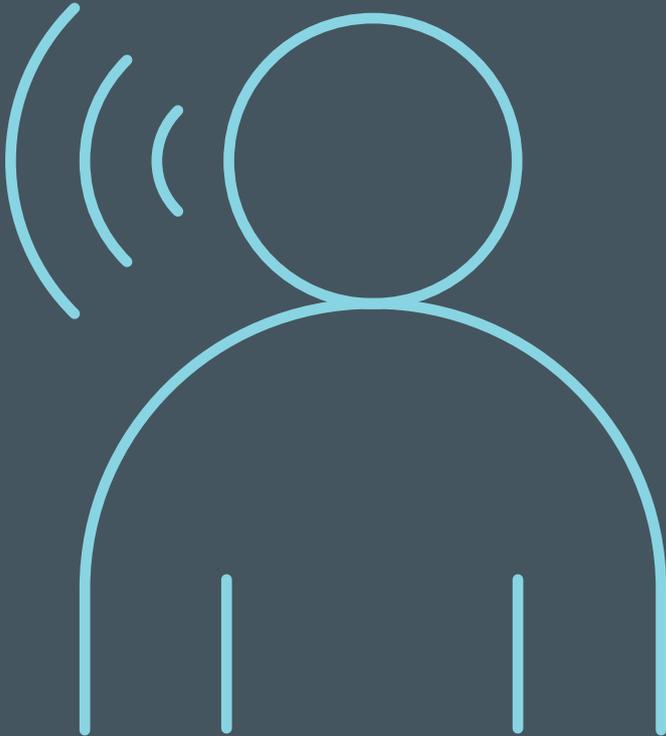
Hearing that others have similar worries and thoughts can make it easier to discuss something that's bothering you.

Everyday event

Being able to talk with others should be an everyday event. Don't put off having a chat and avoid building it up to be a big event, like 'we must talk about the wills', as this can make it daunting for you and the other person. An ongoing conversation over days or weeks allows everyone time to think and give considered input.

'Conversations don't have to be all about the difficulties. Tell each other about the enjoyable events too!'

Support from friends and family is invaluable. However, they may lack the specialist knowledge you need despite their best intentions.



03 Ask for help

Who do we ask, or where do we go, when we need help or advice?

See also '02 – Talk about problems and concerns' on page 15

Friends and family

Support from friends and family is invaluable. However, they may lack the specialist knowledge you need despite their best intentions.

Practical help

Whether you need help fixing a leaky gutter or managing on limited finance, the following organisations can either help you directly or point you in the right direction:

- Age UK offers online and phone support on hundreds of topics from making a will and care in your own home, to keeping active and learning to use the internet
- Citizens Advice service helps people resolve their legal, money and other problems by providing free, independent and confidential advice

- Local councils offer services from adult education and parking permits for disabled people to housing grants and waste disposal, many specifically for older residents
- www.gov.uk provides information on a range of social and legal issues, such as trading standards, dealing with doorstep sales, reporting antisocial behaviour and finding local health services, as well as help understanding money, tax, benefits and pensions

Find out how to contact these organisations on page 58

Emotional help

Admitting that times are tough emotionally isn't easy. Asking for help can be harder. Difficult feelings can stop you getting on with life. Feeling down or anxious for prolonged periods doesn't just impact on you but can affect those around you, for instance if your mood or reactions are unpredictable.

- Samaritans provides confidential non-judgmental emotional support, 24 hours a day
- Cruse Bereavement Care promotes the wellbeing of anyone affected by bereavement and enables bereaved people to understand their grief and cope with their loss
- Your GP can help in practical ways, as well as offering a listening ear, for instance recommending exercise therapy, counselling, help from a specialist or support from another part of the health service
- Counselling offers the opportunity to talk about issues and create a structured plan to make a positive change to your life

See page 57 for contact details.

Online

As well as advice from official sources such as those given above, internet forums, chat rooms and networking sites can allow you to share your own experiences with others facing the same issue.

Age UK and some local councils offer training courses in using email and the internet (see page 56).

‘Your GP can help in practical ways, as well as offering a listening ear, for instance recommending exercise therapy, counselling, help from a specialist or support from another part of the health service.’

04 Think ahead and have a plan

Allowing an issue to become a constant worry can be bad for our mental wellbeing. Having a plan to deal with it puts us back in charge and improves how we feel.

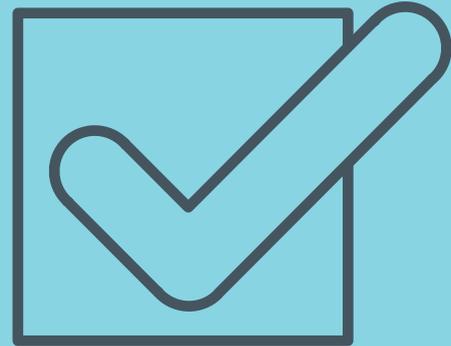
What needs planning?

These are some things that can cause worry as you get older:

- Retirement
- Staying active and having a healthy life
- Physical and mental health of ourselves and others
- Pensions and financial considerations
- Housing
- Remaining independent
- Caring for ourselves and others
- Wills, end of life and funerals

Of course, plan for pleasurable things, too! If you don't have a plan for your time, you may find others plan it for you.

Having a plan helps put us back in charge and improves how we feel.



What a plan can do

A plan can help you think through all aspects of a problem or situation. By preparing a plan you will almost certainly expose and deal with many of your worries in advance.

You may need to do some research, like finding out about the state pension, national insurance top ups, pension credits and buying an annuity.

The government's website www.gov.uk is a good place to start fact finding (see page 58).

Your plan should have a clear aim, such as staying active. A regular review of your plan helps to make sure you are still on track.

Include in your plan the sort of feelings you could experience and how you could deal with them. Discussing wills or care needs with loved ones may be emotional – how will you react?

Use your plan

How you use a plan is up to you – it's for your benefit. Consider if you want to write it down or not. This may depend if you want to share it with others.

By having a plan you always have something to refer back to and use when you face the problem.

Be flexible

Of course, not everything can be planned for, and plans need to change as situations alter, for example a change to the benefit system may affect your financial planning. Review and amend your plans as you need to.

Caring for others can keep relationships strong and make people close.



05 Care for others

As we get older, we may find ourselves looking after grandchildren, elderly parents, partners, friends or neighbours. Caring for others can keep relationships strong and make people close.

Helping others makes us feel needed and valued, as well as boosting our self-esteem. These things are all good for our mental wellbeing.

What type of care?

Care could be looking after your grandchildren during school holidays, or the long-term and full-time care of your partner or elderly parents. Being a carer isn't always easy. Many find it demanding both physically and emotionally.

Looking after a loved one whose mental health is deteriorating can present extra challenges for carers. If this issue affects you, contact your GP, the Mental Health Foundation, Age UK and local social services for support (see page 56).

Who cares for us?

Caring for others can be rewarding, such as seeing your grandchildren taking their first steps or sharing a laugh with a neighbour. However, there can be stresses and strains along the way.

Try not to overburden yourself with care responsibilities. Hard though it seems, it is all right to say 'no'. Making time for yourself is good for both you and the person you care for,

(see '10 - Relax and have a break' on page 52).

If you feel under pressure to keep saying 'yes', then contact Carers UK, Counsel and Care or Crossroads Care for advice or help with respite care to enable you to recharge your batteries (see page 57).

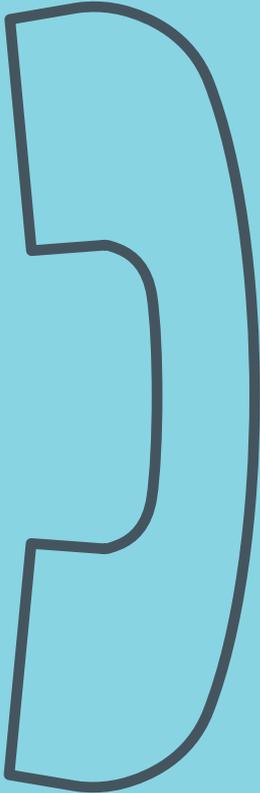
A local carers' support group may help make you feel less isolated with your responsibilities. Talking with other carers helps release frustrations as they understand the pressures caring can bring. There can also be opportunities to share resources, skills and knowledge so everyone (other carers and the people you all care for) benefits. The organisations mentioned above can help, and your GP or local council may know of local groups, services and facilities.

Caring community

If you are interested in helping care for others locally, then the organisations listed above would be glad to hear from you. Voluntary schemes offer a range of help to people in the community, for instance WRVS provides meals on wheels.

To offer your help, visit www.do-it.org.uk

Your friends or family may be able to offer practical help or a listening ear.



06 Keep in touch

Friends

Friends can keep you on track when life is difficult. They can offer a different view on a problem as well as practical help, or be a sounding board for your thoughts.

Friendship takes time, and sometimes effort. It is easy to lose touch with people, especially if their life seems too busy for you or you are feeling down. Having friends is a positive way to maintain good emotional health, even when doing so may sometimes seem hard work.

Don't lose touch with the people who are important to you – it's never too late to get back in touch with old friends.

Small world

You may have friends and family scattered around the country or world. Explore keeping in touch by phone, email, webcam, Skype, Facebook or letter.

The world's not what it used to be...

The world is constantly changing and you are not alone if you feel out of step with it. Technology has had a big impact on the way we communicate. Or you may feel that the values and attitudes you have are no longer respected. Not everyone from the younger generation lives up to their media reputation.

Keeping in touch with people from other generations can help keep this in perspective and make you realise that there are like-minded people of all ages.

Consider volunteering with youth work, chatting more with friends' grandchildren or helping out at a local school.

Having friends of your own generation is important, too. They can better understand life from your perspective. Plus it's good to reminisce sometimes about old TV favourites or the types of cars you used to own.

Old and new

If you're used to a close circle of friends at work, will you keep in touch when you retire? You may find that work friends were great when you shared common problems, but that friendship has now changed.

Don't shy away from making new friends, perhaps with a new shared interest such as researching your family tree, growing your own vegetables or reading.

Friendships do change with time. Sometimes it is difficult to give the time we want to every friendship. Friendships can go sour for many reasons. If a friendship starts to hurt you, mentally or physically, then don't be afraid to take a break from it, or end it.

Is it good now?

Keeping in touch with friends is also about thinking about what is good for them. Don't be offended if your children can't talk when you phone at 6.30pm as they sit down for a family meal or are starting to help with the homework. Likewise, calling people when they are at work won't always get the best result; try meeting them for lunch instead. And if you don't want to be called after 9pm because it's time to get ready for bed, let your loved ones know!

07 Be active and sleep well

Staying active and sleeping well are proven ways to look after our wellbeing.

Physical activity

Regular physical activity and exercise can:

- Boost self-esteem, raise self-worth and improve confidence
- Promote good sleep patterns
- Provide a meaningful activity
- Offer a chance to meet people
- Be something that you really enjoy

Being active doesn't mean going to the gym or wearing lycra, for instance t'ai chi, Pilates, gardening, dog walking, dancing or being part of a walking group are all good ways to get some exercise. Being active doesn't have to cost much money. Many councils offer activities at lower rates for older people.

Regular exercise can also boost your self-esteem and help you concentrate, sleep, look and feel better.



The Mental Health Foundation booklet 'How to look after your mental health using exercise' suggests ways you can get active and stay active.

Physical activity can be as effective as anti-depressant medication in treating mild to moderate depression, which is why exercise therapy is available on prescription in many areas. Information is available at www.nhs.uk or your GP may be able to help.

Sleep

Getting a good night's sleep allows you body and mind to rest, repair and re-energise. Not sleeping well can cause a range of problems including:

- Poor concentration**
- Low mood**
- Irritability**
- A weakened immune system**

In the longer term, trouble sleeping can lead to mental health problems such as anxiety, stress and depression.

Sleep patterns can change with age and may be influenced by habits like:

- Caffeine or alcohol intake
- Pain
- Medication
- The need to go to the toilet

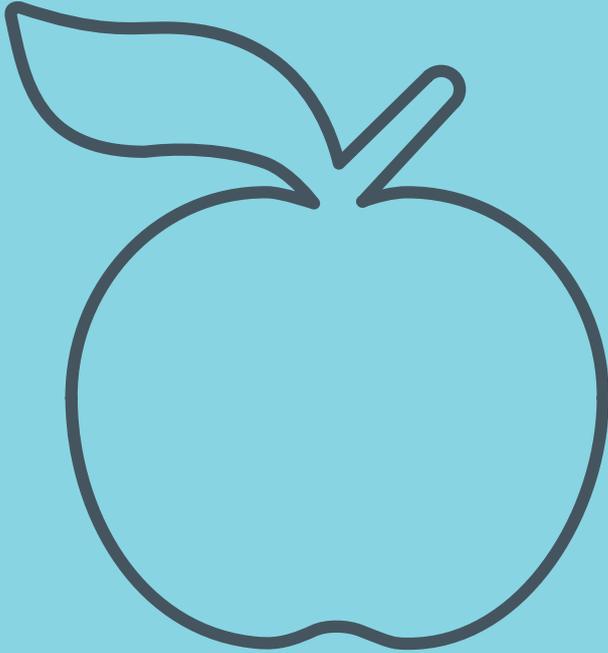
Good sleep doesn't just mean lots of sleep as the amount that each person needs is different. The Mental Health Foundation's booklet *Sleep Well* suggests ways you can improve your sleep (see page 56). You can also talk to your GP about sleep problems as they may be able to change your medication or suggest solutions to other health issues that may be keeping you awake.

Mentally active

Keeping your mind active is important, too. There are many ways of doing this, such as:

- Tackling puzzles, like crosswords, sudoku or wordsearches
- Playing games, like chess, bridge or bingo
- Reading a book, magazine or newspaper
- Going on a course or learning a new skill
- Using your memory, not a list
- Using mental arithmetic instead of a calculator
- Playing a musical instrument if you can

For an active life you need to make sure your body has the fuel it needs.



08 Eat and drink sensibly

What we eat and drink affects how we feel. Sometimes there's an immediate effect, for instance with alcohol. Other things we consume can have long-term impacts.

The Mental Health Foundation has produced several booklets about how mental wellbeing is affected by food and drink

(see page 56).

Balanced and healthy

The human body and mind needs a mix of nutrients to work properly.

Eating at least five portions of fruit and vegetables each day is a vital part of a healthy diet. It doesn't have to cost much to do this.

Stay hydrated

Stopping your body from dehydrating is important whatever the weather. Limit your intake of sugary drinks, caffeine and alcohol.

Moderate drinking

The odd alcoholic drink is unlikely to harm you if you drink in moderation and if alcohol doesn't conflict with your medication. Stay within the recommended daily alcohol units.

For more information on alcohol see the Mental Health Foundation guide 'Alcohol and mental health.'

(see page 56)

Popping to the pub or club for a drink can be a good social experience, but solitary habitual drinking is often a sign of a problem. Drinking alcohol is not a good way to manage difficult feelings.

Social experience

Sharing food or a drink is an enjoyable social event. Make it a reason to meet up with friends, even if it's just for a cuppa in the local café.

Eating properly when coping with bereavement can be difficult, especially if you are not used to cooking for one or preparing meals at all. During this time your appetite may be affected by your emotions. Try not to eat alone all the time. Take up offers from friends and family to eat with them. Find out if there are any lunchtime clubs that operate in your area, perhaps as part of a reading group or other interest group.

09 Do things you enjoy

Doing things that we enjoy makes us feel good about ourselves and life, plus it can keep our mind and body active. Whatever we call them, interests, hobbies and pastimes can provide a chance to socialise, or to find time for ourselves.

Work

Some people enjoy their work so much that they don't want to retire. Explore the options with your employer (see page 09).

Something new

If work has taken up most of your life, it may be time to look around for a new interest to immerse yourself in. Meaningful activity is vital for good emotional health, so try to develop new activities before you retire. Don't be scared to try a few things before settling on the ones that you enjoy.

‘Sometimes when I’m sitting on the bus, I let my thoughts flow and it really helps me.’

You may have skills to share with others. Look at local volunteering options (see page 61), or join a specialist interest group. Time Bank is a skill-share scheme where you benefit from other people's skills in exchange for your own (see page 61). Or you may want to learn new skills or develop an old one. Local councils and universities run a range of education and learning opportunities, often at lower rates for older people.

Companionship

Pets make wonderful companions and can bring social benefits, too. Walking the dog gives you daily exercise, is a reason to go out and is a way of meeting people. House rabbits love to play and cats crave a warm lap to curl up on.

Your local vet or RSPCA can advise you about the best type of pet for you (see page 61).

Your interests

Always make time for your own hobbies and interests. If you are a busy carer, you must still find time for your own interests in order to look after your own wellbeing (see '05 – Care for others' on page 48).

10 Relax and have a break

While being retired or semi-retired may appear to be a permanent holiday, the reality is different. There are still jobs that need doing, like cleaning, car repairs, financial paperwork and shopping. Plus we may have new responsibilities as a carer.

Break from routine

Creating a routine for your day or week can give life a structure or rhythm. However, a break from this refreshes the mental batteries.

Plan free time in your weekly routines for things you enjoy, whether it's time in the park or in the art gallery.

A break needn't be long, just time for what you enjoy and letting your mind recharge. Look at how you spend your time. Can you find half an hour each day to pick up a book or sit with the crossword? What about every week? Is there time for an afternoon out?

Relaxing doesn't have to be about sitting down or physically relaxing. It's about doing something you enjoy.



Taking a break can be:

- A couple of hours away one afternoon
- An evening at the theatre
- A day trip
- A midweek venture
- A two week cruise

It's what relaxes you and helps you take a break.

Cost

Having a break need not cost a fortune. There are many bargains to be had – sometimes for booking well in advance, others for those who book last-minute. Some travel companies offer special rates for older people. Does your council offer free or discounted public transport for over 65s? Are there lower rates or free entrance to local attractions?

Learn to relax

It can be hard to relax if you feel under pressure to be doing something else. This can be because you feel guilty about not caring for others, or because you aren't used to having time to spend on yourself.

Taking time to relax during the day can help you sleep better. Rather than having a 10 minute afternoon nap, try a game of patience or a wander round the park for some fresh air. Don't wait until you are exhausted to have a break.

Right for you

Relaxing doesn't have to be about sitting down or physically relaxing. It's about doing something you enjoy.

(see pages 52)

Having a hectic life may mean you want time alone when you have a break. Or do you want the company of others to stimulate your mind and make you think of things away from the stresses of life? Having a break can be a chance to meet new people and explore interests. It can be as active or as restful as you want – from a pottery course or learning first aid, to a walking weekend or trying paragliding!

Support and information

Mental Health Foundation

We publish a range of materials that may help you, many of which can be downloaded free from our website:

- Promoting mental health and wellbeing in later life
- Sleep Well: Your Pocket Guide To Better Sleep
- How to look after your mental health using exercise
- Smoking and mental health
- Alcohol and mental health
- Healthy eating and depression

Website: www.mentalhealth.org.uk

Age UK

Age UK offers information and advice on a wide range of issues that affect older people and their families.

For online support and to find your local branch, visit their website
Website: www.ageuk.org.uk

Caring and carers

Carers UK

Carers UK is an organisation for carers that campaigns for carers that recognises the value of carers' contribution to society so carers get the practical, financial and emotional support they need.

Website: www.carersuk.org
Email: advice@carersuk.org
Telephone: 0808 808 7777

Independent Age

An advice service for older people, their families and carers to get the best care and support.

Website: www.independentage.org
Email: charity@independentage.org
Telephone: 0845 262 1863

Carers Trust

Provider support for carers and the people they care for.

Website: www.carers.org.uk
Telephone: 0844 800 4631

Confidential help and support

Cruse Bereavement Care

Cruse Bereavement Care offers a range of advice and local services.

Website: www.cruse.org.uk
Email: helpline@cruse.org.uk
Telephone: 0844 477 9400

Samaritans

The Samaritans provides emotional support 24 hours a day.

Website: www.samaritans.org
Email: jo@samaritans.org
Telephone: 08457 90 90 90

Legal, financial and public services

Acas

Acas (Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service) aims to improve organisations and working life through better employment relations.

Website: www.acas.org.uk
Helpline: 08457 47 47 47

Citizens Advice

Has bureaus around the country and provides help online covering topics like consumer affairs, money issues, housing and education. Visit their website for more information, including your local bureau.

Website: www.citizensadvice.org.uk

GOV.UK

The official government website providing access to public services and a range of information from education opportunities to the practical issues when someone dies.

Website: www.gov.uk

Health issues

Alzheimer's Society

Works to improve the quality of life of people affected by dementia.

Website: www.alzheimers.org.uk

Dementia UK

Provides practical and emotional support for those affected by dementia, including specialist mental health nursing support.

Website: www.dementiauk.org
Email: direct@dementiauk.org
Telephone: 0845 257 9406

Depression Alliance

Depression Alliance works to relieve and to prevent this treatable condition by providing information and support services.

Website: www.depressionalliance.org
Email: information@depressionalliance.org

Mind

Mind provides confidential mental health information services.

Website: www.mind.org.uk
Telephone: 0300 123 3393

NHS Choices

Provides a range of health information.

Website: www.nhs.uk

Counselling

The British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy

Website: www.bacp.co.uk
Email: bacp@bacp.co.uk
Telephone: 01455 883300

UK Council for Psychotherapy

Website: www.psychotherapy.org.uk
Telephone: 020 7014 9955

Food, nutrition and healthy eating

British Nutrition Foundation

The British Nutrition Foundation (BNF) delivers authoritative, evidence-based information on food and nutrition in the context of health and lifestyle.

Website: www.nutrition.org.uk

Five a day

www.nhs.uk/LiveWell/5ADAY

Pet Companions

RSPCA

Website: www.rspca.org.uk

Dogs Trust

Website: www.dogstrust.org.uk

Volunteering Opportunities

These websites allow you to find volunteer opportunities close to where you live.

- www.charitysearch.org.uk
- www.csv.org.uk
- www.do-it.org.uk
- www.i-volunteer.org.uk
- www.timebank.org.uk
- www.volunteering.org.uk

You can also contact an organisation directly, for example The National Trust, St John Ambulance, Girls' Brigade or Volunteer Reading Help, to offer your time.

Why not do a Challenge Event for the Mental Health Foundation?

Visit [www.mentalhealth.org.uk/
support-us/get-involved/](http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/support-us/get-involved/)

or call 020 7803 1123

**We hope you found this booklet
useful and informative.**

The Mental Health Foundation is an independent charity. We rely on the support of people like you to fund our pioneering research and information provision.

To find out how you can donate or become involved with the work of the Foundation contact us.

Website: [www.mentalhealth.org.
uk/support-us/get-involved/](http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/support-us/get-involved/)
Telephone: 020 7803 1121
Email: supporter@mhf.org.uk

Mental Health Foundation

Telephone
020 7803 1100

Email
info@mentalhealth.org.uk
Website
www.mentalhealth.org.uk

Registered Charity No.
England 801130
Scotland SC039714

**changing
minds**