

Emotional intelligence: helping carers to achieve balance

Family carers can be faced with a complex and demanding task, but there are few resources to help them. **David Truswell** and **Jacqueline A Hinds** say emotional intelligence training could be the solution

Typically, a person with dementia, particularly Alzheimer's disease, will experience a steady loss of cognitive abilities over several years, during which time the capacity to manage the activities of daily life progressively declines.

In the later stages people living with Alzheimer's disease, as with other dementias, may no longer recognise family and loved ones and may need help with the most basic tasks. Older people with Alzheimer's disease not infrequently have two or more other long-term health problems that have an impact on their daily life and for which they will be having some form of medical treatment.

A huge proportion of people with dementia rely heavily on the support of a partner or family member who plays a significant role in helping them on a daily basis. They may need help with physical health problems that are unconnected with their dementia but which they cannot manage for themselves. Their lucidity may fluctuate, despite being otherwise fit and active.

Someone with dementia may be emotionally volatile, disinhibited, or confused at some time, possibly being aggressive or feeling persecuted too. Memory loss may mean the person becoming locked in repetitions of stories or confusing the present with past experiences. Many family carers will say that this form of caring presents psychological demands unlike caring for those with other serious health problems.

There is increasing recognition that dementia is a complex health issue that challenges the compartmentalised way in which health and social care is provided. As yet, there is no drug treatment for the condition and much of the long-term day-to-day support is provided over many years by family carers. The experience can be emotionally challenging and life-changing. As well as supporting the person with dementia, carers will be managing their own lives

and negotiating the twists and turns of other health problems where there are co-morbidities.

Many carers are themselves elderly, may have their own long-term health problems and may develop physical or mental health problems from the stress of caring. They may also have other regular caring responsibilities and their financial resources may be limited if they are living on a pension or, as often happens, they feel they have to give up or reduce their working hours.

For many people this can feel like the most difficult time in their life. Yet there are few resources acknowledging that carers for people with dementia might benefit from training in managing the demands of caring or that recognise the particularly complex and emotionally challenging nature of their task.

Emotional intelligence

Emotional intelligence (or "EQ" in the organisational development literature) is a management development framework designed to encourage managers to become better influencers and leaders by understanding themselves and others from an emotional perspective.

EQ involves grasping the complexities of social traditions, beliefs, behaviours and traits in order to build relationships and establish alliances to benefit the organisation. It means maintaining an open-minded and resilient attitude to changing demands. The framework focuses on the psychological, emotional and social challenges for managers in the modern world.

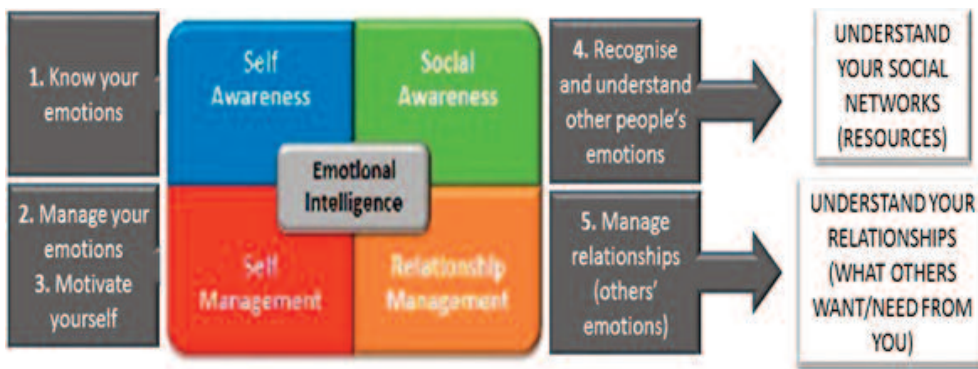
Perhaps surprisingly, there is a parallel here with dementia care and one of the authors (Jacqueline A Hinds) is piloting an EQ project with carers. In the case of dementia care, EQ provides a conceptual framework focusing on maintaining the health and wellbeing not only of the person with dementia, but also responding to carers and family members who may require support and guidance in their own right.



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There is more to EQ than just being able to manage one's emotions and those of others. As well as coming to know how to exercise influence in a given situation, it is about knowing what to do with the knowledge and understanding that you gain. In the EQ framework, there are a host of factors that need to be taken into consideration when working with carers to help them deal with the complexities of their social environment. In dementia care, understanding and managing complex situations in an emotionally and socially attuned way is crucial, providing a stable, comprehensive framework where all those involved can both support others and be supported in turn.

Carers may become overwhelmed by stress and the sense of limits to their own resources when facing the challenges of combining their job role, community role and family role with the demands of caring. Applying the principles of EQ to dementia care-giving, there are four key skills to enable individuals to learn how to overcome stress in the moment, in all relationships, and respond in a way that is emotionally aware. These are:



Self-awareness: You can recognise your own emotions and how they affect your thoughts and behaviour, know your own strengths and weaknesses and have confidence in yourself and your abilities.

Self-management: You can control any impulsive feelings and behaviours, manage your emotions in a healthy way by taking the initiative to follow through on all commitments and adapt yourself while going through periods of change.

Social awareness: You can understand the emotions, needs and concerns of others, picking up on emotional cues and possible issues and, feeling comfortable and confident in a social setting, recognise the power dynamics in group settings or within organisations.

Relationship management: You can understand how to manage and maintain effective relationships, fostering and building strong communication channels in a clear and concise manner. You give others confidence to inspire and to influence, while being confident yourself to manage any conflicts.

Avoiding exhaustion

In the emotionally challenging situations created by caring, family carers may find that they effectively become smart micro-managers while struggling with the complex psychological challenges of coming to terms with the impact of dementia on their loved ones. They also have to cope with the effects on their relationship with the person they care for, the consequences for the wider family and social networks, and the labyrinth of health and social care services which may have a role.

On top of this family carers may need to evaluate paid carers, take over the management of the person with dementia's financial affairs, and seek out and secure help from the voluntary sector. Simultaneously they may try to maintain their social connections and interests while trying to preserve and promote those of their loved one. They



may be providing care for others as well, perhaps doing all this while trying to hold down a job. The result can be emotional exhaustion.

The principles of EQ are a framework for thinking about caring for the person living with dementia in a way that respects both the emotional challenges of the role and the practical complexities of providing care and support. This approach regards the emotional impact and emotional mobilisation of resources, building resilience and sustaining motivation, as all equal in importance to the practical necessities of everyday support and care.

Figure 1 (top left) translates the principles underpinning EQ, particularly the skills around managing one's emotions, into a language more familiar to family carers. This is the bridge between the constructs used in EQ and the reality of daily life for the family carer. It moves away from framing support for the carer as a narrow narrative of reconciling the competing

Figure 1 (top left) indicates how EQ principles can be applied to carers; Jacqueline Hinds running an EQ workshop (top right); potential outcomes of EQ in care (left); and EQ outcomes as sought in management settings (below left)

needs of carer and person with dementia, towards a broader creative conversation about developing, sharing and securing resources in an emotional relationship with shared goals. The main shared goal of the relationship is helping the person to live well with dementia.

Managing the challenge together

EQ sees the relationship as developmental and involving a contribution from all the parties concerned. Both carer and loved one, in this perspective, take on the developmental challenge of trying to live well with dementia, conceived as a complex problem in living they have to manage cooperatively. Both will be changed by the experience as will those around them who are living through this challenge with them.

Living well with dementia is not only the objective for the person who has the condition, but also the objective that the carer has for themselves. EQ provides a more thoughtful, emotionally nuanced context for taking the decisions that may have to be made at the point when the family carer has to relinquish their primary caring role to enable others to take on the majority of caring tasks.

Supporting the person living with dementia, for example, to move into residential care is often fraught with feelings of guilt for carers and is a situation that requires careful and detailed consideration. It involves a careful balancing of emotional, relationship and practical concerns and EQ provides a framework to help carers manage this balance in the best possible way. ■