

# Dementia caregivers' stress leads to sleep deprivation

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New Edith Cowan University (ECU) research has found 94 per cent of Australians caring for a loved one with dementia are sleep deprived.

This can potentially lead to poor health of the carer and may also impact on their ability to provide care for the person living with dementia.

Poor [sleep](#) is associated with negative physical and [psychological outcomes](#) including hypertension, obesity, mood disorders and dementia.

The study, led by Dr. Aisling Smyth from ECU's School of Nursing and Midwifery in conjunction with Alzheimer's WA, investigated the sleep characteristics and disturbances of 104 Australian caregivers of a person living with dementia. In addition, it assessed the psychological wellbeing of caregivers by evaluating associations between mood and sleep.

Dr. Smyth said a disrupted sleep pattern is recognized as a significant factor in predicting stress on carers and perhaps more importantly, in predicting placing a loved one into [long term care](#).

"Enabling people living with dementia to stay at home, rather than transfer to long term care is the optimal outcome for many families, but this can't be at the detriment of the caregiver's own wellbeing.

"Therefore, to support the person living with dementia to remain at home, preserving sleep and maintaining caregiver health is vital," Dr. Smyth said.

## **Key findings:**

- 94 per cent of participants were poor sleepers, with 84 per cent having difficulty initiating sleep and 72 per cent reporting difficulty maintaining sleep.
- Stress was the most significant predictor of overall sleep quality.
- 44 per cent of participants have two or more chronic conditions such as cardiovascular disease, osteoarthritis and diabetes.
- Psychological distress was common among participants with high

levels of moderate to severe depression, anxiety and stress.

Alzheimer's WA Head of Dementia Practice Jason Burton said:

"We hear from many family members about the effect the caring role can have on their quality of sleep, and the negative impacts this can have.

"We have partnered with ECU in this research to learn more about this impact and to find ways to support carers to maintain their health and quality of life."

## Sleeping better

Dr. Smyth is now working on a program to promote better sleep for [dementia](#) caregivers at ECU Psychological Services.

"The aim will be to help them get to sleep quicker and have more efficient and effective sleep. We will also measure whether better sleep improves their ability to provide care," Dr. Smyth said.

"If there's a shorter window that they can sleep in, we're aiming to optimize it so it's really good."

The program will use cognitive behavioral therapy designed to help carers manage their stress and equip them with the knowledge and skills to improve their sleep.

**More information:** Aisling Smyth et al, Disrupted sleep and associated factors in Australian dementia caregivers: a cross-sectional study, *BMC Geriatrics* (2020). [DOI: 10.1186/s12877-020-01726-1](https://doi.org/10.1186/s12877-020-01726-1)

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