

CARING FOR THE CARER

Making You a **Priority**



Tips to look
after yourself
and prevent
fatigue



Home Instead[®]

To us, it's personal

INTRODUCTION – BEING A CARER

There's no doubt about it – being a carer is tough, whether you are a professional CAREGiver or a family carer. The hours can be long, the work can be physically and emotionally exhausting, and the physical or cognitive condition of the person you are caring for may deteriorate as time goes by.

Family carers often face particularly trying circumstances in that they are emotionally connected to the person they are caring for and therefore, much more emotionally drained when their health status changes, especially through the progression of illness.

Despite the challenges, many carers report very high levels of job satisfaction and often find their role a very rewarding one. Helping other people can be extremely fulfilling, which is why we all enjoy it so much. Making a difference to another person's health and wellbeing is very satisfying, as is making people happy and comfortable. Caring for others is good for the soul, and it really does work both ways.

Sometimes, though, everyone needs a break.

This Home Instead guide will help carers look for the signs of exhaustion and fatigue that can make their jobs and lives so much more difficult for everyone involved. Half the battle is realising that as a carer, you need attention too.

We'll support you with tools and resources to look after yourself to prevent problems, and also tips on how to recover from fatigue.

It's never too late to look after yourself.

CARING FOR THE CARER

Making You a Priority

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WHY WE CARE FOR OTHERS

In order to prevent exhaustion and fatigue, it's important to understand the reasons why we take on the role of caring for others.

The role of a carer is to assist in providing the person you are caring for with the best quality of life possible, regardless of his or her situation.

It is not the role of the carer to 'fix' the person you are caring for and the carer should not feel they need to 'heal' the person. Instead, caring should focus on improving that person's quality of life.

A sick person may still deteriorate and die despite your best efforts at caring for them. It's important not to equate the situation of the person you are caring for with your success as a carer.

This fundamental change in attitude to your caring responsibilities may help prevent some of the mental anguish that can lead to compassion fatigue.

WHAT IS COMPASSION FATIGUE?

All carers need to show compassion and be empathetic as part of their job. However, it can be common for this to wear thin under certain circumstances – and this is referred to as ‘compassion fatigue’.

Compassion fatigue relates to experiencing an overwhelming emotional and physical burden, stemming from the act of caring. Senior Psychologist Suzanne Osbourne from Acacia Employee Assistance Program describes compassion fatigue as *“what occurs when you give and give of yourself until your cup is no longer full and you’re left numb”*.

Deakin University researchers define compassion fatigue as *“a gradual reduction of compassion over time”*, and note it’s most common in professions that depend on a compassionate workforce like nursing, social work, and psychology.

Empathy is commonly defined as having the ability to see another person’s perspective and to sense others’ emotions. For carers, compassion fatigue means a reduced ability to feel empathy towards clients or family members they’re caring for. It can also lead to mood swings and irritability, and dissatisfaction with their caring role.

A study for the United States Journal of Nursing estimated between 16% and 85% of all health care workers develop compassion fatigue at some point, making it a considerable problem to address.

Deakin’s Dr Stephane Bouchoucha says compassion fatigue is likely to be prevalent when patients or clients are particularly unwell. In fact, compassion fatigue is more common among nurses who are caring for cancer patients and those in intensive care than those who work in general wards.

Dr Bouchoucha explains compassion fatigue is more likely to occur if there’s a disconnect between what’s happening to the client, and what carers think should be happening. Compassion fatigue is more common in care settings where a person’s suffering is unresolvable.

This means if your clients or family members are deteriorating physically or cognitively despite your best efforts to care for them, you may be much more susceptible to developing compassion fatigue. Sadly, it’s even more likely to occur as time goes on – which is why it’s so important to recognise the signs and symptoms of compassion fatigue, so you can manage them early or help prevent them all together.

RECOGNISING THE SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

Perhaps the first sign of compassion fatigue is when a carer feels a creeping sense of dissatisfaction for a growing period of time. It may go away or it can worsen, leading to more serious symptoms.

You don't need to be a professional carer to experience compassion fatigue. You just need to be a caring individual.

Sometimes, the first clues may be when you feel overwhelmed and start questioning your capacity to keep helping the person you are caring for. Psychologist Suzanne Osbourne says most people with compassion fatigue report an undeniable sense of not feeling like themselves. *"You get so caught up in being whoever you need to be for someone else that you end up losing yourself,"* she says.

There are two main categories of symptoms – psychological and physical.

Psychological symptoms include:

- Lack of empathy
- Irritability and anger, limited tolerance for stress
- Apathy and sadness, no longer finding joy
- Questioning meaning and purpose of life
- Depression and mood swings
- Anxiety, unrelenting thoughts and concerns
- Difficulty concentrating and functioning
- Feelings of isolation from colleagues or friends
- Nightmares or flashbacks to traumatic events
- Increased pessimism
- Poor self-esteem.

Physical symptoms include:

- Exhaustion, including constant feelings of tiredness
- Insomnia and sleep disturbances
- Gastrointestinal problems
- Chronic pain
- Headaches
- Poor coping including self-medicating and increased substance use
- Decreased efficiency when completing tasks
- Reduced motivation to maintain own hygiene and appearance.



HOW TO PREVENT COMPASSION FATIGUE

Looking after yourself, remaining positive, and staying healthy is the key. Exhaustion leads to a myriad of health problems, especially compassion fatigue.

When carers get tired and rundown, they simply must take time to rest and recharge. It's impossible for carers or health workers of any kind to help others if they're not in good shape themselves. If you're a family carer, it can affect your relationship with the loved one you're caring for – and may well jeopardise the quality of care they need to receive from you. If you're a professional carer, it can also affect your career – a lack of empathy may mean you are not meeting your 'duty of care' because compassion fatigue can negatively affect your ability to provide the level of care required.

The best solution is to try and prevent compassion fatigue from occurring in the first place. So, how do we best look after ourselves?

Make Time for You

First of all, stop putting it off! Make yourself a priority, no matter what, without feeling guilty for doing it. You can't help others if you are not coping yourself. Allocate time to yourself every day, or whenever you know you need it. Do whatever it takes to have a whole day to yourself, if you know that's what you need.

Don't avoid asking others for help. Some people find it hard to accept help, but if you know you need it, you also know that you will feel so much better after having some time to yourself. Carers know the value of helping others, but you must also be able to ask for help to look after yourself effectively.

Do Something You Enjoy

So you've taken time off from your caring role, even if it's just a little while – now, make it count. Don't do chores or tasks – you must do something you really enjoy! Think about what you'd really like to do if you had the time. Write it down, schedule it in, make a firm plan, and stick to it.

Doing things we enjoy makes us happier and more contented. Being happier helps clear our heads, keeping us fresh and capable to tackle the rest of the day or the week's work ahead – whatever it involves. When you're happy and content, the world is brighter and full of possibilities. You are also more able to make logical decisions and be more objective, rather than make incorrect decisions based on emotional reactions.



Look After Your Body

We all know how to best look after our bodies, but when it comes to the crunch, our bodies often bear the brunt of our 'lack of time' for ourselves. We might not eat properly, we get less sleep, we don't exercise as often as we should – the list goes on.

It's up to you to take a stand, and put what you know into practice. Make a promise to yourself to look after you – first and foremost. Eat well, get the sleep you need, and make daily exercise a priority. It can mean the difference between developing compassion fatigue and keeping it at bay – or the difference between feeling good and feeling dreadful.

Checking In

It's always a good idea to stop and take stock for a few moments - each day if you can. Psychologist Suzanne Osbourne recommends 'rating' how you feel on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 is when you feel very much like yourself and 10 is when you feel you're being untrue to yourself.

“Regularly gauging where you sit on the scale in this manner allows you to monitor change and engage in appropriate support as required. Education and self-awareness are key to supporting yourself to recognise the signs of compassion fatigue – that means knowing how it presents in you, so you can regularly check in and review where you are at,” she says.

Mindfulness and the practice of being mindful can also help – being present in each moment and enjoying the small things in your day. Enjoy the calming effects of taking the time to understand what is happening around you. There are some resources around mindfulness offered in the Resources section of this guide.

Develop Your Own Self-Care Plan

Take all of the above points that work for you and write them down. Allocate time for each activity in your diary every week and stick to it. That's the essence of a self-care plan!

As a general rule of thumb, make sure the activities in your self-care plan bring you a sense of rest, relaxation, or revitalisation, so your time for you can have a significant positive impact on your wellbeing and resilience.

You can find a template for your own self-care plan in the Resources section of this guide.

HOW TO RECOVER FROM COMPASSION FATIGUE

Prevention is a wonderful idea in theory, but sometimes compassion fatigue overwhelms us before we even know it exists. Perhaps it's been there in the background for years.

So how can we recover from compassion fatigue after it's set in?

The good news is the solutions are very similar to the prevention methods outlined in the previous chapter. It's all about taking time for yourself, finding the positives, and looking after yourself every single day.

Perhaps the most important step in recovering from compassion fatigue is changing your mindset. The way you think can allow compassion fatigue to creep in. You may have thought 'I can keep going, I'm fine, I can do this without a break, I don't need help, I'm coping okay'. That's the mindset that sets you up for exhaustion. It's okay to acknowledge that you were wrong and you were overdoing it.

It can be very helpful to focus on the sense of satisfaction you can gain from helping those you are caring for. This focus on your own satisfaction can in turn help you to detach from their suffering, especially in cases where the person you are caring for is very ill or dying. You can still be a great carer, but simply allow yourself some time each day to focus on your own needs and feelings.

Remember, once compassion fatigue is present, you need to be regimented in your approach to combatting it:

- **Take time for yourself every day** – do not fail yourself because you may end up failing your clients and/or loved ones; be compassionate with yourself to fight compassion fatigue.
- **Eat a healthy diet** – plenty of vegetables, protein and fibre; avoid sugary foods, especially to combat tiredness at the end of a long day.
- **Exercise every day, no matter what** – whether it be walking with the person you're caring for (if possible) or pushing them in a wheelchair at the shops; also consider relaxing exercises such as yoga, stretching, and even massage.
- **Pay special attention to your sleep** – make sure you get a good night's sleep every night, especially during times of extra work or high stress; new linen can be a self-care treat that's also comforting.

- **Do one relaxing self-care activity every day** – whether it be a warm bath, a body scrub in the shower, cleaning and painting your toenails, even just moisturising your face and hands; you'll be surprised how good it makes you feel to just do that one thing for yourself each day.
- **Breathe** – focusing on your breathing can make an extraordinary difference, especially if you are feeling frustrated, angry or overwhelmed; take deep, slow breaths and you can often feel your heart rate return to normal.
- **Spend some time in nature** - A strong connection to the natural environment enhances emotional wellbeing and reduces feelings of isolation. Spending even 10 minutes in nature has been shown to significantly increase our happiness levels.
- **Catch up with friends and people who care about you** – if you can't or don't want to go out at night, exercise with a friend during the day or talk on speakerphone while you do chores; maintaining your social connections is vital and it's especially wonderful to hear familiar voices in challenging times.
- **Talk about your experiences of compassion fatigue with colleagues who understand** – find out what works for others and try it; sharing your concerns can be a great comfort.
- **Have a laugh** – this might mean watching a funny movie or some comic videos online; laughter really is the best medicine and this can be a great activity to do with the person you are caring for, to give you both a lift.
- **Practise gratitude** – this can mean making a list of who and what we appreciate, because being grateful can help us positively influence our thoughts.
- **Be mindful** – being actively present in the here and now offers space for you to reflect and consider the actions that you can take to improve a situation.
- **Set emotional boundaries** – this is clearly more of a challenge for family carers who are often related to the person they are caring for, but professional carers are well advised to think about setting clear emotional boundaries to maintain compassion and empathy for others while maintaining emotional safety.



- **Review your diary before bed each night to make time for you** – be proactive rather than reactive by scheduling things you want to achieve, and avoid spending time on things that worry or especially challenge you; only take on what you feel you can handle.
- **You are not a failure** – carers sometimes feel their contribution is not making a difference when the person they are caring for is dying; a client dying is not a failure, rather it is a carer's role to help enable the best quality of life right to the very end.
- **If nothing is working to make you feel better, seek some professional help** – this could mean finding a counsellor through your GP or contacting your employee assistance scheme; Home Instead employees are encouraged to contact Acacia Employee Assistance Programs if they need any help.

As you can see, recovering from and preventing compassion fatigue are really entwined. The focus is on you: investing in you and improving your quality of life.

Remember, you are not alone and support is always available.

COMPASSION FATIGUE AND ELDER ABUSE

Elder abuse is defined by the Australian Government's Institute of Family Studies as "...the physical, emotional, sexual, or financial abuse or neglect of an older person by another person in a position of trust".

There is documented evidence that compassion fatigue has been linked to the occurrence of elder abuse. A report to the Western Australian Parliament in 2018 stated while "...most perpetrators of elder abuse are closely related to the victim... elder abuse still occurs within aged care settings... there are many instances of carers being overwhelmed with their responsibilities, who inadvertently commit elder abuse because of their inability to cope".

The report continued: "Carer stress or 'carer burnout' is also a risk factor for elder abuse, where a perpetrator may experience difficulties whilst caring for an older person or may not have/know of support services available."

This is further proof that self-care and looking after yourself can help prevent a myriad of problems for both you and the person you care for.



RESPIRE OPTIONS FOR FAMILY CARERS

Often, compassion fatigue in family carers can be the result of sheer overwork. In some situations, alternative care options may be limited. Perhaps the family carer feels it is their role, and no-one else's, to care for their loved one 24 hours a day.

Then, when a loved one's condition deteriorates, the workload for the carer becomes ever greater.

It's important to know that help is available to relieve family carers of some of their workload and enable them to have a break. Remember, if you can't take time to care for yourself, how can you care for others?

Home Instead can provide in-home respite care at short notice for a few hours, a few days, or even longer. The options are endless and flexible, allowing family carers the opportunity to plan and take some valuable time out. You may even qualify for financial assistance.

We will match your needs and preferences with CAREGivers you can work with and trust. Contact your local Home Instead office to discuss your needs.

FOCUSING ON YOUR MENTAL HEALTH

Caring for others can be a huge strain on our mental health, regardless of the individual circumstances.

Whether you have experienced compassion fatigue or not, looking after your mental health is crucial to being a good carer. Here are a few tips and activities you can do to make sure your mental health is as robust as possible.

Talk to Someone

Talk to a friend about how you're feeling. Tell a trusted colleague or a family member. Talking about our woes or worries can help them seem smaller and easier to deal with. Talking about any problem or challenge helps you process and sound out possible solutions, and that makes us all feel better.

Be a listener, too. It can be very enlightening to hear how others have dealt with similar problems to yours.

Keep a Journal

Writing it all down works wonders. This is especially the case during times when it might not be possible to talk to a friend.

Keeping a journal helps us express our own self-reflections. It clarifies our thoughts and helps us to think things through calmly. The Writers' Digest states "...journal writing helps to clear the mind by transcribing emotional clutter onto the written page. The writer becomes a witness to past behaviours, paving the way for fresh thought and perspective". Why not give it a go?

Enjoy Sunlight

Getting out and about in the sun really does make us feel better, which leads to improved mental health. Sometimes all it takes is sitting in the garden or on a sunny verandah for a few minutes each day. Sunlight naturally increases our melatonin levels. Melatonin is a hormone associated with regulating our moods and reducing anxiety. It also helps us sleep.

Sleep Quality

Don't feel guilty about heading to bed early – if you're exhausted, get some extra rest. Learn to recognise how you feel when you wake up; this is where journalling also helps. It takes more than one night of good sleep to improve your mental outlook, so aim for consistency.

If you're having trouble falling or staying asleep, pay special attention to your pre-sleep routine – make adjustments to your night-time eating habits, try a warm bath, new or clean bedlinen, and perhaps read a relaxing novel. Try different things to see what works best for you.

Avoid Alcohol or Other Drugs

Be very careful of substance use and abuse as a coping mechanism. It's widely documented in medical literature that alcohol can make the symptoms of mental illness worse, so it's best to avoid alcohol if you are struggling to maintain your mental health.

It's wise to avoid alcohol during times of extreme personal or professional stress. If you notice you are under pressure, you'll be better able to perform at your best without the added recovery time from alcohol or other drugs. Ask yourself: is there a better and healthier way to deal with your current stress levels?

Build Resilience

We know it can help to plan and diarise self-care time in advance, especially when you know you've got a busy period ahead. Write your own Self-Care Plan, either with pen and paper or electronically – there are some suggestions in the Resources section of this booklet to help you stick to your new self-care routine.

Sticking to a routine or a schedule can help you build strength, resilience and willpower in challenging times. If you start by diarising self-care times and activities, you're more likely to stick with them. You'll thank yourself at the end of each busy week if you plan and stick to some time for yourself.

It might also help to identify in your plan the barriers that may stop you booking in self-care time, and try and plan to overcome those barriers before they may happen. For example, if you think picking your children up from school would prevent you from enjoying some self-care time, you could arrange for a friend to pick your children up one day a week, and perhaps you can return the favour.



TOP SELF-CARE TIPS A CHECKLIST

- ✓ Make Time for Yourself Every Day – Do Things You Enjoy
- ✓ Look After Your Body – Eat Well, Exercise, and Sleep
- ✓ Design a Self-Care Plan – Make it Routine
- ✓ Be With Friends – Laugh Together
- ✓ Meditation Techniques – Breathing, Mindfulness, and Gratitude
- ✓ Plan Your Diary – Keep A Journal
- ✓ Check In – Rate How You Feel
- ✓ Seek Help – Talk About It


Change Your Mindset – Self-Care is a Necessity, not a Luxury

INVEST IN YOU

REAL ADVICE FROM CARERS

Marg has 35 years' experience working in aged care:

"My message would be to love yourself first before you love others. Writing things down – the exercise of reflecting is very valuable. Think of how much you've achieved, identify some of the challenging times and some of the opportunities that have come from those challenges. Having challenges builds resilience – you learn from what's happened to you. I love journalling – having that check-in allows you that luxury of 'down tools' time – 'Am I on track?' It's okay to get help, it's okay to link with a colleague or a counsellor. Connect with things that are important to you and see what fits for you."



Kristy is a carer who experienced compassion fatigue after working for months on limited sleep:

“Self-care is not an option, it’s always a must. We cannot pour from an empty cup, so we need to practise self-care. It’s an opportunity for you as well, to reflect, and to be self-aware – what do you like best? Self-care is something you really need to do for yourself because you have a responsibility to provide care to others. In aged care, you really need to look into yourself first, because you’ve got vulnerable people who require much of your care. I didn’t realise how important self-care was until I started to burn out. I became emotionally drained and it made me realise the importance of self-care. It’s not selfish, it’s a must.”

David mostly works with dementia clients who have challenging behaviours:

“You can’t look after others unless you look after yourself. I’ve got hobbies, I try to switch off as much as I can. I love my garden; I have a vegetable plot. I like cooking. My partner and I go for walks, we socialise – self-care can be just thinking of yourself. You’ve got to recharge your batteries. When you’re gardening, you’ve got to fertilise, mulch and water plants. You’ve basically got to do that for yourself, too. Eat, drink, rest and chill out.”

Rachel is a palliative care nurse who recommends self-care plans:

“I ask people to tell me about their self-care plans and they say, ‘What?!’ When you are writing a care plan for a patient, you are thinking about their physical, emotional, spiritual needs etc. What do you do for yourself? I think putting pen to paper has a commitment behind it. It’s about not forgetting – that’s what self-care is about. It’s about prioritising yourself in the picture. It’s not just about giving and doing – it’s about you as well.”

Camille also works in palliative care and says a self-care plan is the best way to get started:

“Self-care is really now a priority in my life and I don’t see it as an indulgence, I see it as a necessity. It’s a vital part of my day-to-day practice and I see it as part of my responsibility to my clients and my colleagues. I personally find that being strategic and proactive about it really works for me. I think we’re all so busy that if we don’t make time to practise self-care, days and weeks and months tend to fly by and often we’re very run down or reaching an edge state, pre-burnout – and that’s when we realise. Putting aside time every day, even if it’s only 10 minutes or half an hour, it makes a lot of sense.”

RESOURCES FOR YOU

Here is a downloadable Self-Care Planning Tool to print out and fill in:

palliativecare.org.au/download/15974/

Here's how to get started on mindfulness:

www.mindful.org/meditation/mindfulness-getting-started/

Have you only got a few minutes? Here is a 7-minute Mindful Breathing Exercise:

soundcloud.com/palliativecareaustralia/self-care-matters-mindful-breathing-guided-exercise

Have you got a little longer? Here's a 15-minute Guided Relaxation:

soundcloud.com/palliativecareaustralia/self-care-matters-body-scan-guided-relaxation

Here's a 24-minute Guided Relaxation that encourages self-compassion:

soundcloud.com/palliativecareaustralia/self-care-matters-self-compassion-for-self-care-guided-meditation

You might like to do further reading about self-compassion:

self-compassion.org/

You can read more tips on how to boost your mental health with Carers Australia:

carersqld.com.au/support-services/mental-health/

Here are some additional support organisations for yourself and your ageing loved one:

Carer Gateway; www.carergateway.gov.au or 1800 422 737

My Aged Care; vhc.org.au or 1800 200 422

VHC Assessment Agency; 1300 550 450

National Dementia Helpline; www.dementia.org.au or 1800 100 500

MS Australia; www.msaustralia.org.au or 1300 010 158

Parkinson's Australia; www.parkinsons.org.au or 1800 644 189

MND Australia; www.mndaustralia.org.au or 1800 777 175

Carers NZ; www.carers.net.nz or 0800 777 797

Seniorline; www.seniorline.org.nz or 0800 725 463

Ministry of Health; www.health.govt.nz

Veterans Affairs NZ; www.veteransaffairs.mil.nz or 0800 483 8372

Dementia New Zealand; www.dementia.nz or 0800 444 776

Multiple Sclerosis New Zealand; www.msnz.org.nz or 0800 MS LINE (0800 675 463)

Parkinson's New Zealand; www.parkinsons.org.nz or 0800 473 4636 (0800 4 PD INFO)

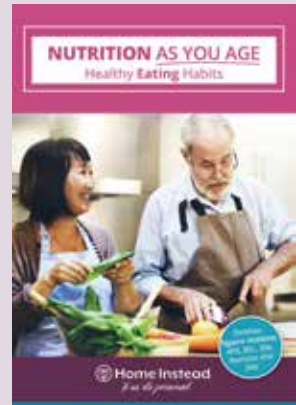
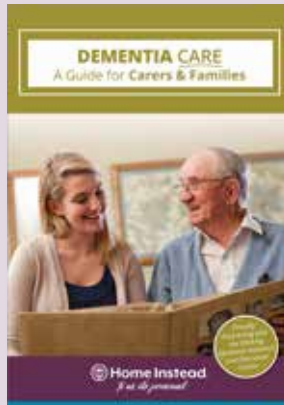
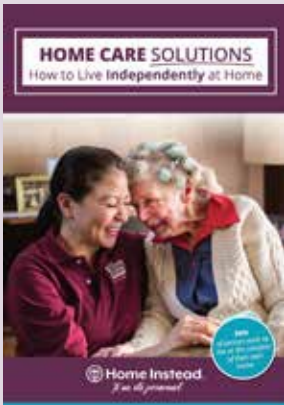
MND (Motor Neurone Disease) New Zealand; www.mnd.org.nz or 09 624 2148

Home Instead Resources

Information, tools, tips and other guides.

As a community care organisation, we are committed to educating and empowering individuals, families, carers and communities with an understanding of the various home care services and support available to them.

Home Instead strives to help you navigate ageing with a variety of resources. From help with understanding the aged care system, negotiating family relationships and difficult conversations to resources on home safety, end-of-life planning and managing conditions such as dementia; helping you find answers is important to us.



Our website is another great resource for ageing information along with our monthly newsletter and Facebook pages.

Find out more today at [HomeInstead.com.au](https://www.HomeInstead.com.au) | [HomeInstead.co.nz](https://www.HomeInstead.co.nz)

I would **recommend** Home Instead services to anyone looking for **personalised, kind, and respectful** care for their loved ones.

Maureen



To us, it's personal.

Home Instead is **YOUR** specialist, national provider of high quality, in-home care for ageing adults.

We help with a range of personal and lifestyle needs while providing welcome companionship. Our services include assistance with personal care, light household duties, meal preparation, medication reminders, and transport to appointments, shopping and social outings. We take personal responsibility for providing the best in-home care and support to meet our clients' needs and are committed to addressing the individual and national challenges of the ageing populations in Australia and New Zealand.

We are part of a global network – Home Instead was founded in 1994 and now provides care across a network of 1400 offices around the world. Our network is committed to changing the face of ageing by enhancing the lives of ageing adults and their families wherever we operate.

We understand that to you, it's about finding trustworthy care for your ageing loved one.

To us, it's personal.

Contact your local Home Instead office for a free no-obligation care consultation where we can discuss your needs and provide you with information, advice, care and support to help you and your family find the right home care solution for you.



HomeInstead.com.au | HomeInstead.co.nz