



Phoebe Duvall

My name is Phoebe and I'm originally from Denver, Colorado in the States. I've been living in Dublin for a little over two years now. I'm an only child, and my parents are still living in Denver.

My mom was diagnosed with mild cognitive impairment back in 2014, and that diagnosis was changed to Alzheimer's in March 2017. Even though we always knew the progression to Alzheimer's was a possibility, it was quite a blow. My mom struggled to cope with the news initially, but she handled it remarkably bravely. It was in many ways much harder for my dad, and his stress level skyrocketed - something that's still a major issue today.

When we first got the diagnosis, I honestly knew very little about dementia and Alzheimer's. I felt anxious, lost and completely unprepared. After doing some online research, I came across the Alzheimer's Society of Ireland.

I decided to enrol in Home Based Care – Home Based Education the online family carers course to educate myself about the disease itself, what to expect going forward, and how to support my parents, especially from far away.

I'm obviously not the primary carer, but I wanted to be sure that I could be as supportive as possible for both of them. Although my mom is the one with Alzheimer's, I think my dad is in need of just as much support, albeit in different ways. He's notoriously bad at taking care of himself emotionally and will put the needs of his loved ones above his own, almost to a fault.

The online course is presented in a very effective multi-media format with videos, presentations, and readings that cover all aspects of dementia: the physiological changes in the brain, how relationships can change, health and safety for the person with dementia, effective communication, how to care for yourself as a carer, and much more. There are quizzes, polls, and assignments, such as creating care action plans, to help you apply all the information to your own situation.

But crucially, all of this is paired with discussions with other course participants via online forums and a weekly video chat. Being able to share experiences and insights with others going through similar things was absolutely invaluable. It really helped me digest and process all the information the course provides, a lot of which can be quite distressing.

Hearing ideas from my colleagues on the course not only gave me tips for dealing with things in the present but also gave me ideas to store away for when my mom reaches the later stages of the disease. But I think the most valuable aspect of the discussion was the emotional support. The forums and video calls were safe spaces to discuss the whole range of the emotional roller coaster with others with similar first hand experiences. I finally felt less alone in dealing with this.

I can't overstate how valuable this course was for me. It gave me the tools to be able to support both my mom and my dad lovingly and effectively, even from across the Atlantic. I've been able to pass along information and resources to them as well as to other members of our family like my mom's brother. I've also been able to develop strategies for supporting them in the day to challenges and changing how I communicate with them. I've also become much more effective in encouraging my dad to take care of him and get support. There's a long way to go, but it's a good start.

The past several months have really represented the shift from me being the child who is being taken care of by my parents to me being the one taking care of them. It was somewhat jarring, but the course and the support from the Alzheimer's Society have made all the difference. Obviously the future is very uncertain, but this course gave me the knowledge and the confidence to face this challenge head on together with my parents.