

Worksheet 10:

Rhiannon's story

My dad was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease when I was fifteen years old. He was only thirty-six. From that point on, I was faced with the need to be a carer for my dad – a role no child expects or is equipped for.

Watching my dad slowly lose his ability to be the dad he always wanted to be was really hard. I didn't understand what he was doing. He used to get lost in familiar places, and he would ask me the same question over and over again. He was very angry sometimes. He worried about everything and got really frightened at night, which used to frighten me too.

My mum had to reduce her hours at work to care for my dad. He wasn't able to wash or dress himself, so I helped him sometimes. My mum used to get upset and tell me that I shouldn't have to be doing this. But I didn't mind – dad and I used to have a real laugh sometimes, and I felt very close to him then.

The teachers at my school knew about my dad and noticed when I was a bit upset. I think they were a bit more lenient with me too when I wasn't able to get my homework done because... well... I couldn't concentrate at home and felt that it was more important to help my mum and dad. I suppose in a way I became a carer for both of them. I felt very protective of my mum, and I could see how much she struggled every day.

My real friends were kind and tried to help in their own way. They used to take me to town for coffee and always invited me to parties and gigs and stuff... even though after a while I always turned them down because I didn't want to leave mum and dad on their own. My friends were too frightened of my dad to come in the house, so I spent a lot of time on my own – feeling left out. I got really angry sometimes; not with my dad, as it wasn't his fault, but with the situation. I then started feeling really guilty too.

I wanted to be in a 'normal' family doing the things 'normal' teenagers did. I started seeing a counsellor at school which helped me. I could say things to her that I wouldn't say to my mum – I would never tell her how I really felt, she didn't need to be burdened with that too.

Some people didn't get it. I remember some kids at school calling me 'the girl with the mental dad'. My gran (my dad's mum) tried to help out as much as she could, but other relatives stopped coming round. They said it was too upsetting to see my dad the way he was. That made me cross too. Just when you need people the most they disappear.

My dad couldn't work, and my mum worked part time, so money was really tight. Anything we had went on stuff for dad; incontinence pads, laundry, medications, people to come and sit with him when mum and I weren't there. Mum had a battle with social services who said they couldn't help because of dad's age, and because he didn't qualify for a lot of benefits. Because mum worked, she didn't qualify for financial help either.

Things started getting really bad for my dad and I just couldn't give him the care he needed. He went to a nursing home. My heart and my mum's heart broke that day. I don't think they will mend.