SAMH
for Scotland's mental health

HOW TO COPE WHEN SUPPORTING SOMEONE ELSE

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This booklet provides advice for people who are supporting or acting as a carer for someone else, and want to know how to look after their own mental health. It offers advice on how to look after yourself and where to get further support.

Further information

To read or print SAMH's information booklets visit samh.org.uk.
If you require this information in word document format for compatibility with screen readers, please email communications@samh.org.uk

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What counts as supporting or caring for someone else?

Supporting someone else is sometimes called caring. You are a carer if you provide (unpaid) support and care for someone who has an illness, disability, mental health problem or addiction.

People often assume that carers tend to be women but research shows that around four in ten carers are men.

Being someone's carer probably only describes part of your relationship with them. You may also be a parent, partner, sister, brother, child, friend or other family member. This relationship can be just as (or more) important to you. You may also have other caring roles as well, for example as a parent to other children.

Supporting others can be mentally and physically exhausting. The time you spend caring can really vary too – some people look after someone for just a short time and others find themselves caring for someone for the long term.

Caring and the benefits system

The benefits system defines you as a carer if you meet the criteria for Carer's Allowance (the main welfare benefit for carers in the UK).

If you receive Carer's Allowance from the DWP you can also apply for the Scottish Government's Carer's Allowance Supplement. But even if you don't meet this criteria, you may still be a carer and need additional support. The Carers (Scotland) Act 2016 explains how local authorities should assess you and what your legal rights are. Carers Scotland can provide more information and advice *(see 'Useful contacts' on p.18)*.

'I WAS COMPLETELY UNAWARE THAT WHAT I WAS DOING WAS A CARER ROLE AND THE EFFECT IT WAS HAVING ON ME. I DIDN'T THINK ABOUT REACHING OUT FOR SUPPORT MYSELF.'

What might I have to do if I am caring for or supporting someone else?

Caring for someone can mean a range of things. Being patient and giving can feel like part of the normal give and take of any relationship, but sometimes you might find yourself spending a lot more time and effort helping another person. You may provide a range of support including:

- giving emotional support
- helping someone seek help for a mental health problem
- helping someone cope with a mental health problem
- cooking and cleaning
- personal care, such as help with washing and going to the toilet
- budgeting and looking after finances
- supporting them to live with others in your family (e.g. brothers and sisters)
- helping other family members understand the needs of the person you are caring for
- giving medicine or providing medical care
- going to appointments and advocating on their behalf (helping them express their views and wishes)
- checking they are safe.

My partner/family member has a mental health problem. Am I a carer?

If you look after someone with a mental health problem you might be unsure about whether what you do 'counts' as caring or whether it's just part of day-to-day life. A lot of people associate caring with physical tasks but giving emotional support can also be a big part of caring. *(See 'How can I support someone with a mental health problem?' on p.8 for more information.)*

I'm a young person who supports someone else

Lots of young people care for someone else in their family.

It can be a tiring and difficult job, especially when you have to fit it in around school or work.

There is a lot of support available to help make things a bit easier for you. The Carers Trust Scotland can help you find local services near you (see 'Useful contacts' on p.18).

How can supporting someone else affect your mental health?

Supporting someone else can affect your mental health and make it harder to stay well. Although you may really want to care for someone, you may also find it difficult and upsetting. This section lists some of the challenges that you might face.

Stress and worry

You may often feel stressed and worried if you're caring for someone else. You could spend a lot of time thinking about the impact of the illness and what will happen in the future. You might find it hard to switch off. If you feel this way over a long time, it can have a big impact on your mental health.

Anxiety

Many carers say that they feel a constant anxiety about the person they care for. If your feelings of anxiety are strong or last for a very long time, they can become overwhelming. *(See SAMH's booklet Understanding anxiety and panic attacks for more information.)*

Less (or no) time for yourself

You'll probably have less time to look after yourself (for example by being physically active, eating healthy food and relaxing). You may feel as though your health takes a back seat or you don't have time to get the help you need.

Isolation and loneliness

You might have less time to socialise or carry on with hobbies and interests. If you've given up work, you may not see the people you used to. You might find that the relationship with the person you look after has changed and you don't feel as close.

You might feel as though your life is very different and other people don't understand how you're feeling. You might find it hard to ask for help or to let people know you are a carer and why. This can make you feel very lonely. Over time, social isolation can lead to mental health problems such as depression and anxiety.

Money worries

You may have to pay for extra care, medical or travel costs. This can put a strain on your finances, especially if you're not getting enough financial support or benefits. You may have to cut down on work or juggle work and caring, which can be difficult, especially if you are/were the main wage earner. Debt and money worries can be linked to mental health problems.

Lack of sleep

If you're supporting someone who needs help at night – or you're very worried and stressed – you may not get as much sleep as you need. Not getting enough sleep can affect your mental health.

Depression

You may find that the challenges you face when looking after someone else can make you feel low or depressed. If you feel very frustrated or hopeless you may have thoughts of harming yourself or ending your life. You might also develop unhelpful coping strategies to deal with difficult feelings, such as using drugs or alcohol, or eating more or less than you need to. *(See SAMH's booklet Understanding depression for more information.)*

Frustration, anger and guilt

You may feel frustrated, resentful or angry – especially if you've given up parts of your own life. You might feel you have been given no choice about the situation. You might end up directing this anger at family or at the person you support – which in turn could make you feel guilty.

Low self-esteem

Looking after someone else can have a big impact on your self-esteem. You might feel that all your time should be focused on them. You might lose confidence in yourself and your abilities to do anything except supporting someone else. If you have given up work, you may feel that you have lost an important part of yourself.

'IT ISN'T EASY. THERE ARE TIMES WHEN IT IS DESPERATE, EXHAUSTING AND MISERABLE. BUT OVERALL I THINK WE'RE STRONGER, MORE HONEST AND MORE RESILIENT AS A COUPLE.'

The positive side of looking after someone else

As well as the challenges and difficulties caring for someone else might present, it can also be a really positive and rewarding experience to know you are helping someone else.If you receive Carer's Allowance from the DWP you can also apply for the Scottish Government's Carer's Allowance Supplement. But even if you don't meet this criteria, you may still be a carer and need additional support. The Carers (Scotland) Act 2016 explains how local authorities should assess you and what your legal rights are. Carers Scotland can provide more information and advice (see 'Useful contacts' on p.18).

How can I support someone with a mental health problem?

If you support someone with a mental health problem, you may face slightly different or extra challenges.

I've never really seen myself as a carer

If you don't do many physical caring tasks, you may not really see yourself as a carer. But there are lots of other ways you might support someone. For example you might:

- provide emotional support
- help them to manage day-to-day tasks
- support them when things are more challenging
- advocate for them
- encourage and support them to seek help
- make phone calls for them
- encourage them to feel confident about making decisions
- be there for them during treatment.

You may find that other people (for example family and friends) don't see you as a carer either. It may help to show them this booklet.

I don't think I help much

You may feel frustrated that you can't make someone feel better, or as if you are not 'enough' to make them happy. But, like physical illness, mental health problems can affect anyone. No one can prevent someone else from having a mental health problem. You're probably helping a lot more than you think.

If possible, try talking to them about how you help already. Try to build up a clear idea about what you can do, and accept parts that you can't do alone or things that you cannot change. Accepting what's possible and being aware of your limits can help you feel less helpless.

I don't really understand what they are going through

If you haven't experienced a mental health problem, it can be difficult to understand what it's like. Ask them to try and explain – but remember it isn't always easy to describe. Sometimes looking at what other people with a similar diagnosis have said in books, films or personal blogs online can help them find a way to put how they're feeling into words.

'WHILE I HELPED HIM WITH THE DAY-TO-DAY THINGS HE FOUND OVERWHELMING, I ALSO WAS MENTALLY HIS CARER TOO. I WAS COMBATING HIS NEGATIVITY EVERY DAY, TRYING TO CAJOLE HIM INTO KEEPING GOING.'

I'm worried I'm doing the wrong thing

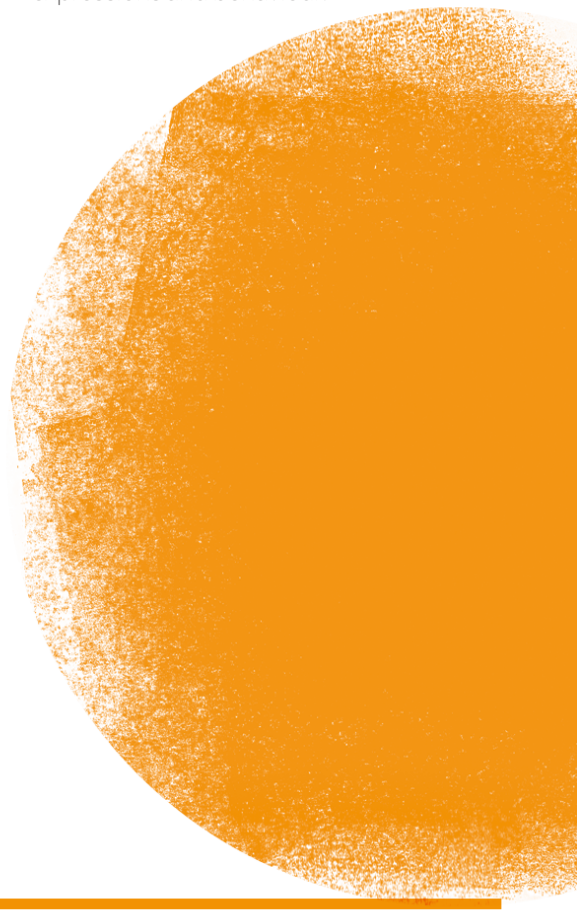
It's hard to know how much care to give or what to do for the best. You may be worried that they're becoming too dependent on you or that things you do are not really helpful in the long term. All the booklets in our Understanding series contain a 'How can friends and family help?' section, which can be a good place to start. You might also find it helpful to seek out online support from other people who have a mental health problem or who support someone else.

It's not always easy for someone to explain what would help in the moment. Some people find it helpful to set up little systems for communicating – for example you could make colours stand for different needs, like this:

- Blue – I love you but I need to be alone.
- Amber – I can't talk but I do need company.
- Red – I'm feeling angry and irritable but it's not because of you.
- Black – I'm feeling vulnerable today.

When someone is unwell, it can sometimes be easier to say "I'm feeling amber" than to find the words. Different things work for different people – try to find something that works for you both.

Some people won't feel willing or able to tell you when their mood has changed and what they need. This can make it really hard for you and it's understandable if you sometimes get things wrong. Over time you might find that you can interpret how they are feeling and what they need from their expressions and behaviour.



Their behaviour is making life a struggle but they won't seek help

If you feel that they need support but can't or won't reach out for help, and won't accept any help you offer, it's understandable to feel frustrated, distressed and powerless.

Sometimes you might feel that you recognise signs they are becoming unwell before they do. You could try and prepare for this by making a list of signs together while they are well.

This can make it easier to talk about when you do notice things changing.

You may need to decide together how they want you to help if they get ill again. But it's important to accept that there are always limits to what you can do to support them.

They push me away or say things that upset me when they are unwell

You might find that they say or do upsetting things sometimes. It's easy to take difficult feelings out on the person you are closest to. They may push you away but get upset if you leave. They may find it harder to be patient or get angry more easily. They may even feel convinced that you are a threat to them in some way.

It's understandable to be upset and hurt. Remember that your mental health is important too *(see 'How can I look after myself?' on p.14)*.

Caring and confidentiality

You may feel as if you have the right to know more about their treatment.

Not knowing may make you feel excluded or unable to help. The Royal College of Psychiatrists website has a useful online leaflet called 'Carers and confidentiality in mental health', which explains what information health professionals can share with you

(see 'Useful contacts on p.18).

Our relationship is changing

Mental health problems can affect moods, emotions and behaviours. It may feel as if their personality is changing and they're not the person they used to be. This can affect your relationship. You might find that your relationship feels unbalanced or that you only ever do 'caring' things together.

It can help to try and see the mental health problem as something separate from you both – an external challenge to deal with together.

It's really hard to get them the help they need

The mental health system is complicated. You may find yourself having to fight for the right support for them.

I'm worried about their safety

It's common to feel scared about the possibility of someone seriously hurting themselves or even taking their own life. While it is understandable to have these fears, it is useful to remember that self- harm doesn't necessarily mean that someone wants to end their life.

There are, however, a small number of people who do go on to take their own lives, either intentionally or accidentally. It's therefore important to have an honest conversation with your friend or family member about staying safe – for example, being aware when things are getting too much and knowing when to seek help. *(See SAMH's booklet Suicide... Are you worried about someone? for more information.)*

I'm worried about what other people think

You might be worried about how other people will treat the person you care for – or you as their carer. Stigma and misunderstanding can be upsetting, especially if it comes from friends, family, colleagues or even health care professionals.

Looking after a young person with a mental health problem

Looking after a young person with a mental health problem can create additional strains and worries. You may blame yourself or feel helpless and frustrated that you can't help them feel better. You may bear the brunt of their emotions and anger.

It's common to think that as a parent you 'should' be able to cope – but you don't need to do this on your own. Talk to people around you and ask for their help, or if you don't have family, friends or a community that you feel you can turn to for support have a look at what help is available in your area.

YoungMinds provide lots of helpful information on their website. They also have a Parents Helpline which you can contact for free confidential advice *(see 'Useful contacts' on p.19)*.

How can I look after myself?

As a carer you spend a lot of your time focusing on someone else. You may feel as if you just have no time at all for yourself.

But looking after your own wellbeing is important for you and for them. This section contains some suggestions that others have said they find helpful. Even just choosing one small thing to change might help you feel more able to cope.

I'm at breaking point – help me

Sometimes the pressures of supporting someone else can build up until it feels as if you just can't cope any more. This is completely understandable and may be a sign that you need to try and look after yourself. If you are feeling desperate and in crisis, you won't be able to keep supporting someone else.

Try and take a small break. If that's impossible, have a moment to yourself and take some long deep breaths. Knowing that things will get easier in the future can help you feel a little calmer.

Think about who you could contact for support right now. It might help to make a note of your next steps so you feel more in control. For example, the Samaritans are there 24 hours a day to listen and to help you find a way through *(see 'Useful contacts' on p.18)*.

Talk about how you feel

It can be really important to have someone to talk to, especially if you are struggling to cope. You could:

- share your feelings with someone you trust – this might be a family member or a friend
- join a support group for carers
- visit the Carers Trust Scotland website to find out about their online communities *(see 'Useful contacts' on p.19)*.

'THE BIGGEST THING FOR ME IS MAKING TIME FOR MYSELF; IT IS VERY EASY TO FEEL GUILTY ABOUT MAKING TIME, AND VERY DIFFICULT TO DO ON A PRACTICAL LEVEL.'

Ask for help if you need it

Most carers need some additional support. Think about whether family and friends could help you. People don't always know what they can do to help but may be happy to lend a hand if you can tell them what you need. Your employer may also be able to help more than you think. You have a right to ask for flexible working hours if you have caring responsibilities.

Be realistic

If you take on too much, you may feel as if you never achieve anything. If you have a clear idea about what you can do, and accept the parts that you can't change or do alone, you may feel more able to cope. You could:

- make a list of all the support the person you are caring for needs
- identify (with them if possible) what you can do and what you need help with
- think about how you'll be able to tell when you need a break and write this down too.

'I LOOKED AFTER MY FRIEND WHO WAS SUICIDAL FOR WEEKS, NOT KNOWING WHAT TO DO TO HELP. WHEN I WAS FINALLY AT THE END OF MY TETHER, I CALLED SAMARITANS. I DIDN'T REALISE THEY WERE ABLE TO HELP ME TOO. AFTER A RELATIVELY SHORT PHONE CALL I WAS POINTED IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION TO GET HELP FOR MY FRIEND AND ALSO FOR ME.'

Stay organised

Staying organised can help you feel more in control. You could keep a schedule or planner of your daily routine and make sure that you keep all important information and medication in one place. But don't beat yourself up if you get muddled or things get lost – you've got a lot to think about. It may also help to let someone else (a friend, family member or paid worker) know where the information is and what to do if you become unwell yourself.

Support their independence

Work with them to see how they can help themselves. Work out what support they need from you, and whether there are times that they can cope on their own. It's important to help them have some control over their care. You may find this means taking a step back or supporting decisions that are not what you would do. But it can also mean that you are able to find a balance in your relationship and perhaps a little more time for yourself.

Find positives in your relationship

Looking after someone can change your relationship with them. Sometimes you may feel close and connected but at other times you may feel angry and irritated. It can help to talk openly and honestly to find way of coping together. Try to:

- think of yourself as their friend, partner or family member first and foremost
- talk together about how to strengthen positive parts of your relationship
- do nice things together as well as day-to-day responsibilities. The Carers Trust Relationship Guide is a useful online resource which is available through the Carers Trust website *(see 'Useful contacts' on p.18)*.

'I CARED FOR MY HUSBAND FOR MANY YEARS WITH NO SUPPORT. I WISH I'D KNOWN THERE WAS HELP AND HOW TO ACCESS IT SOONER.'

'RESPITE IS POSSIBLE – AND NECESSARY. YOU CAN'T GIVE YOUR ALL AS A CARER – YOU JUST CAN'T. YOU HAVE TO SAVE A BIT OF YOURSELF JUST FOR YOU.'

Take a break and make time for yourself

You may not be able to take a break every time you need one but it's important to have some time that's yours. You may need an hour or two to clear your head or a day to help you feel more rested. You could go out, take a bath or turn your phone off for an agreed period of time. Try to make time for things you enjoy.

If possible, try and plan regular breaks into your routine. This can help you make plans in advance, give you something to look forward to and make sure the person you look after knows what to expect.

Sometimes you may need a longer break, especially if you are worried that you are becoming unwell. The Carers Trust website provides information about the help you can get to take a break.

Look after your physical health

- Get enough sleep. Lack of sleep can make it difficult to cope with day-to-day challenges and can make stress and depression worse.
- Learn a relaxation technique. Relaxation techniques can help you feel more rested. Most of these techniques can be done for just a few minutes each day.
- Exercise and eat well. It's important to try and make time to look after your physical health as best you can. Try and eat healthily and do some kind of regular physical activity.

What support can I get?

There are organisations who can help make things easier for you. This section contains details of some services who could offer you extra support. Unfortunately, it isn't always easy to get the support you deserve – and some services are only available in certain places. However, it's worth finding out more about your options.

'MY GP SAYS CARING IS A MARATHON NOT A SPRINT, SO PACE YOURSELF ACCORDINGLY!'

Support for your mental health

- Your GP. It's always ok to seek help, even if you are not experiencing a specific mental health problem.
- Talking therapies give you time to talk about your worries and explore difficult feelings with a trained professional. You might find it helpful to have space to talk about how looking after someone else affects you. You can access talking therapies through the NHS, but waiting lists can be long. Alternatively you can find a private therapist through the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) *(see 'Useful contacts' on p.18)*, but be aware that private therapists usually charge for appointments.

Practical help

- Social care support. Social services may be able to provide support for you and the person you are looking after. The kind of support you are offered will depend on both your needs. This will be decided through a formal carers assessment.
- Financial support. You may be able to get some money to help you. This could include Carer's Allowance and/or housing and council tax benefits. The person whom you care for may also be entitled to some benefits. Benefits and financial support can be complicated and they are not always easy to apply for. Turn2us can advise which benefits or grants you might be eligible for, and Citizens Advice can help if you are having problems *(see 'Useful contacts' on p.18-19)*.
- Respite care. You may be entitled to support to help you have a break. If you have a carer's assessment it should include information about respite care. Some voluntary organisations can also help. NHS Carers Direct has a database of local support services *(see 'Useful contacts' on p.18)*.
- Support at work. If you are finding it hard to balance paid employment with looking after someone else, you have a right to ask your employer about flexible working arrangements. This could involve going part time, changing your work pattern or job sharing. You are also entitled to reasonable time off work to deal with emergencies. NHS Carers Direct has more information about your rights at work.

Useful contacts

Breathing Space

T: 0800 83 85 87
W: breathingspace.scot
Confidential out of office hours telephone line for people experiencing low mood, depression or anxiety.

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)

T: 01455 883 300
W: bacp.co.uk
Information about counselling and psychotherapy, and details of local therapists.

Carers Trust Scotland

T: 0300 772 7701
W: carers.org/country/carers-trust-scotland
Information and advice on all aspects of caring.

Citizens Advice Scotland

T: 0808 800 9060
W: cas.org.uk
Advice on legal issues, money and other problems.

COSCA (Counselling & Psychotherapy in Scotland)

T: 01786 475140
W: cosca.org.uk
To find a counsellor or psychotherapist

Give Us A Shout

T: 85258 (text only)
W: giveusashout.org
24/7 crisis text line.

Mental Welfare Commission Scotland

T: 0800 389 6809 Service users and carers line
W: mwcscot.org.uk
Offers advice and guidance on mental health care and treatment.

NHS Choices: Carers Direct

T: 0300 123 1053
W: nhs.uk/carersdirect
Information from the NHS on support available to carers.

Royal College of Psychiatrists

W: rcpsych.ac.uk
Advice and information to improve the lives of people with mental illness.

Samaritans

T: 116 123
E: jo@samaritans.org
W: samaritans.org
Freepost: RSRB-KKBY-CYJK, Chris, PO Box 9090, Stirling, FK8 2SA
A 24-hour free telephone helpline.

See Me

W: seemescotland.org
National programme to tackle mentalhealth stigma and discrimination.

Scottish Intercollegiate Guidelines Network (SIGN)

T: 0131 623 4720
W: sign.ac.uk
Evidence-based clinical practice guidelines for the NHS in Scotland.

Shared Care Scotland

T: 01383 622 462
W: sharedcarescotland.org.uk
Charitable organisation that offers advice and assistance to access short breaks and respite care for those that are cared for and their carers.

Turn2Us

W: turn2us.org.uk
A national charity that helps people in financial hardship gain access to welfare benefits, charitable grants and support services.

Since 1923, **SAMH** has represented the voice of people affected by mental health problems in Scotland. We are here to provide help, information and support.

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