



Wellbeing Resources

The Disabled Police Association

'You're Not Alone

Caring for a chronically ill, or disabled family member carries a lot of responsibility, it can be a double edged sword at times, rewarding but also challenging. The first rule is to take care of yourself. Trying to balance caring responsibilities with working and daily life will always generate elements of stress, and whilst some stress is normal and manageable feeling regularly overwhelmed could indicate that you are heading for burnout or fatigue.

The second in our series of factsheets for carers looks at stress and ways in which we can look after ourselves as well as balancing work, family and living 365 days a year. After all, we may be part of that network of UK carers, but we are also individuals with specific needs, wants and requirements.

Putting Yourself First



Putting your needs last might feel like the right thing to do when you are a carer, but in the long term you could be storing a whole heap of physical and emotional health issues which if not addressed will

overflow. Eventually you may even burn out and become too ill to carry on caring, so neglecting your health is just as bad for the person you care for as it is for you.

Many carers say their own health has suffered as a result of their responsibilities. But there are lots of simple lifestyle changes that you can make to help you feel better today and protect your health in the future.

Take a look at the following statements:

- ? You can't sleep properly (even when your family member does)
- ? You are permanently exhausted and cannot be bothered to do things you used to enjoy

- ? You worry constantly about money, future finances, and how you will be able to manage
- ? You have lost your appetite and are not eating properly – or are eating too much and have gained weight
- ? You are having anxiety or panic attacks
- ? You are drinking or smoking too much
- ? You pretend everything is OK and rarely ask for help
- ? You often feel tearful and emotional when you think about 'what might have been' if you were not a carer

Now be honest with yourself, how many of these statements sound familiar. Do you recognise yourself in quite a few of them? Remember stress does not only affect you mentally, but it can also lead to physical ill health which in turn can impact on your ability to be a good carer.

So even if you find it hard to put yourself first (many carers do) if you are determined to do the best you can for your loved one, you need to start taking care of yourself too.

Carer's Fatigue

Carer's fatigue is a state of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion that may be accompanied by a change in attitude, from positive and caring to negative and unconcerned. Factors that may lead to fatigue can be:



- **Role confusion** – many people find it difficult to establish and separate their role as a carer and their role as a partner, child or friend
- **Unrealistic expectations** – many carers expect their involvement to have a positive effect on the health and happiness of the person being cared for. This may be unrealistic for those living with degenerative or progressive diseases
- **Lack of control** – many carers become frustrated by a lack of money, resources and skills to effectively plan, manage and organise their loved one's care

- Unreasonable demands – some carers place unreasonable burdens upon themselves in part because they see providing care as their exclusive responsibility
- Recognising illness – many carers cannot identify when they are suffering from fatigue. If left untreated, fatigue can lead to the carer becoming sick and being temporarily unable to provide care

How Can I Prevent Fatigue



If your battery is close to empty then here are some strategies which may help:

- ✓ Find someone you trust, a friend, colleague and talk about your feelings and frustrations. Don't be afraid to ask for support
- ✓ Set realistic goals and accept that you may need help with your caring responsibilities
- ✓ Set aside time for you, it is not a luxury, it's an essential. Try to focus on relaxing or being sociable and catching up with friends and family
- ✓ Go see your GP. They will be able to help you deal with a range of physical or emotional needs, as well as arrange things such as the flu vaccine
- ✓ Research respite care – charities such as Carers Trust provide support workers to allow carers some time for themselves
- ✓ Know your limits. Learn to recognise your own symptoms of fatigue and seek help when you start to feel overstretched
- ✓ Educate yourself, the more you know about the condition that your family member has, the more effective you will be in caring for the person with that specific illness
- ✓ Learn to be an optimist (this may be hard) and try to meet challenging circumstances with a positive attitude
- ✓ Stay healthy by eating a healthy balanced diet and by getting plenty of exercise and sleep
- ✓ Accept your emotions. Negative feelings such as anger or frustration towards the person you care for are completely normal. When you feel stressed take five minutes apart from the person you care for, concentrate on taking slow deep breaths until you feel calm
- ✓ Join a carers support group. Sharing your feelings and experiences with others in the same situation can help you manage stress and reduce feelings of isolation
- ✓ Have a carers assessment – your local social services department might be able to offer you help with day to day caring or provide you with equipment to make life easier.

Carers and Work

Being stressed whilst caring is quite a normal reaction, but then add work into the mix and the bucket is close to overflowing. There are six million people in the UK caring unpaid for an ill, frail or disabled family member of which three million are working – that is 1 in 7 in every workplace.

It's important that as a carer and juggling work, you look at your options. Factsheet Number 1 details the types of things which may be available to you in the workplace such as agile working, unpaid leave, and flexible working. It is vital that Forces support working carers. Taking the more flexible approach not only benefits the carer but research has shown that the business benefits too.



Being flexible ensures that as Forces we attract and retain valuable staff. It reduces stress which then reduces stress related absences. By retaining our staff, this will have a knock on effect on recruitment and training costs, as well as increasing resilience and productivity. Carers develop many additional skills which can be utilised by organisations for example negotiation, time management, multi-tasking and advocacy. Therefore keeping carers in the workplace ensures that these are used for the benefit of all.

Who Can Support Me?

As a carer there is lots of support out there - below outlines some avenues you may wish to explore

- ✓ Your line manager – let them know you are a carer and any reasonable adjustments that you may need in the workplace
- ✓ Occupational Health
- ✓ Union or Federation
- ✓ Peer Support
- ✓ Your local Disability Network