LOOKING AFTER YOU

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YOUR OWN HEALTH AND WELLBEING

The caring role makes many demands on you the Carer. It is therefore important to look after your own physical and emotional health.

*Here are some tips on how to take better care of you yourself:*

**Keep Healthy**

By making time for regular exercise this will help you feel more energetic and provide a break from your daily activities. Always try to have healthy and regular meals. It is not always easy to do but in the long term it is important for your health and wellbeing.

Tiredness and exhaustion can often add to the stresses of caring it is vital to try and get enough sleep and rest. Take special care of your back especially where lifting is involved. Get professional advice on how to lift properly and avail of any technical aids such as hoists where possible.

**Take time for yourself**

Getting into the habit of making time for you as a regular part of the day is important. Don't feel guilty about this time as it is for you. Planning ahead and pacing yourself will also help. If possible plan activities such as housework, for times when you are feeling at your best.

Although it can be easier said than done you need time to yourself every day to relax. It does not need to be long; even fifteen minutes can do wonders. Try to take time to sit and relax, listen to music or read a book.

**Getting Out**

Continue, if possible with activities you enjoy outside the home as it is important to follow your own interests outside your caring role. Some carers feel guilty when they leave the house to enjoy an activity without the person they care for.

If you are finding it difficult to get out talk to other family members, the local Carers Resource Centre manager or your Public Health Nurse.
**Take a Break from your Caring Situation**

Breaks can be taken in your home or away from it. They might be for a few hours a day or week.

You can use this time to sleep, do shopping, have a holiday yourself or just to “do nothing” – a luxury that Carers rarely if ever get to enjoy.

**Reduce the Isolation**

It’s easy to become isolated when you are a Carer. You may become too busy to keep up with friends and family, people may visit you less and thus loneliness often becomes the worst part of being a Carer. Sometimes just talking to someone who understands what you are going through can be a great help. Your local Family Carers Ireland Resource Centre or Outreach Service can put you in touch with other people to share similar experiences. When ideas, feelings, concerns, information and problems are shared, the experience of caring can seem less isolating.

**What if I am not coping**

Most Carers will tell you they have times when they feel weighed down and unable to cope.

If you are feeling this way it is vital to speak with someone about it – your family, friends, GP or contact your local Family Carers Ireland Resource Centre.

**FEELINGS ASSOCIATED WITH THE CARING ROLE**

Carers, throughout their caring role experience a range of different feelings. There are no right or wrong feelings as they are a normal and natural reaction to caring.

Each Carer responds differently to the demands of caring. Feelings are always individual. It is important to regard your feelings as signposts as they will tell you when things are not going well and may need attention.

**The following are some of the feelings that Carers often experience:**

**Love and Commitment for:**
- The person you are caring for.
- The opportunity to care for your loved one at home.
- The opportunity to give back the love to a parent who cared for you all your life.

**Frustrated and Angry at:**
- The person you are caring for.
- Others in the family who don't share the caring.
- Having to be a Carer.
- Lack of supports and services.
- The loneliness and isolation.
- Friends that no longer contact you.

**Guilt for:**
- Not wanting to be a Carer.
- Believing you bear some responsibility for the illness or disability.
- Losing your temper with the cared for person.
- Needing a break from caring.
- Placing the person you care for in residential care (either short or long term).
Looking After You

Sadness for:
- Loss of a relationship with the parent, husband or wife or child you once knew
- Loss of the life you once had
- Loss of the life you planned
- Loss of a sexual relationship with your partner
- Loss of opportunities for the person you are caring for.

Overwhelmed, Confused and Shocked by:
- The diagnosis of illness or disability
- Finding yourself caring and realising the changes this will bring to your life

Afraid about:
- What will happen if you don’t cope
- Picking up your life after the caring role ends
- What will happen to your loved one if you die?
- Who will care for him/her?

Stresses of Caring

The constant demands of caring and the many changes in family life for a Carer may bring about a range of feelings and emotions. There are no right or wrong feelings.

All Carers respond to the demands of caring in their own way.

Caring for a severely incapacitated person at home is not easy. Carers can feel a deep sense of satisfaction in doing a very important job of work at home which maintains the independence and dignity of the person being cared for.

The Carer can feel that the work he/she is doing at home is unrecognised and unappreciated by the state. Depending on family circumstances, attitudes within the home can vary from supportive words and actions to lack of interest to criticism of the Carer and the quality of care provided.

The relationship between the Carers and the person being cared for, varies from family to family. Factors affecting the relationship between both include the nature of the relationship (daughter-mother, son-mother, mother child, and so on), and the quality of the relationship before the caring situation arose.

Issues centred on the ‘control’ exercised by one party over another can be crucial. The need for the Carer to assist the cared for person in independent living has to be balanced with the expectations of both and the perceptions of both of the role of the Carer. The tendency to ‘exert control’ over the other person applies to both parties.

The context in which the caring takes place is also important. For example, if the Carer has to give up work to care at home, the financial strains of being a Carer, the expressed or implied longer-term financial benefits for the Carer (such as ‘understandings’ on property inheritance rights) and many other ‘hidden’ factors can come into the equation.
Important also are the caring duties involved and the health of the Carer. The physical and emotional stresses caused by very intensive long-term care at home can be high. Many Carers suffer a range of physical and emotional difficulties, with in some cases, serious deterioration in the Carers health.

**Feeling Depressed**

Sometimes being a Carer can be overwhelming. Over time you may stop feeling sad or angry about your situation and just feel numb.

Even happy times don’t seem to lift you and simple tasks seem to take too much energy. You may find you are sleeping too much or waking early or during the night, feeling worthless or agitated most of the time and have difficulties making decisions.

These changes may be signs you are suffering from depression. Depression is a serious illness which is often overlooked.

It is common and treatable. Talk to your doctor, who will help find the best treatment for you.

**How can I deal with difficult feelings?**

Feelings are individual and so too are ways of dealing with them.

However, there is a way to deal with difficult feelings that many Carers say is very helpful that is by talking to someone.

This can be to family and friends, other Carers in a Carers group or to a qualified counsellor.

**CARER GROUPS**

Carer groups provide carers with the opportunity to:

- Meet other Carers in a similar situation
- Have a break from their caring role
- Access Information
- Share their feelings in a non-judgemental situation
- Reduce isolation

Sometimes family and friends do not understand the condition of the person you care for but people in the carer groups will understand.

**COUNSELLING**

Counselling involves talking to someone who understands the stresses and emotions involved in caring and can work with you to give you the encouragement, support and ideas to improve your situation. It may assist with the many changes in your relationships and roles as well as dealing with the strong feelings associated with caring.

Counselling is usually one-to-one so it is important you feel comfortable with the counsellor you choose. Anything said is completely confidential, so it’s a good chance to talk about those things you may feel you cannot raise with family or friends.
LOOKING AFTER YOU

CHOICE FOR CARERS

There are many issues which contribute to the build-up of stress, anxiety and worry and a general sense of being 'taken-for-granted'. Carers feel that the extent of their work and contribution in providing over 90% of all social and health care in local communities is grossly underestimated.

With greater awareness of the existence of Carers, there is a general feeling of goodwill towards Carers amongst the general public and policy-makers.

Carers can become angry. However, when they see the lack of the 'follow-through' policies and supports they need.

Carers should have choices. If the Carer wishes to remain working at home adequate supports need to be provided. These supports include practical assistance with caring duties, respite care (residential and home-based), training and education opportunities for social interaction, involvement in the planning and delivery of services supporting Carers and finance to recognise the value of their work and to cover the additional costs of providing care at home.

It is also important that Carers have their own personal and self fulfillment needs recognised and supported.

Key issues for Carers in providing choice and coping with stress include:

Family/Supports:
• It is important to involve family members from the beginning so that all the responsibility does not fall on you. If they cannot give day-to-day care they may be able to give you a break from caring or financial contributions towards the cost of caring.
• Accept help from friends or neighbours if they offer.
Health:

- Visit your GP regularly for check-ups and make sure they are aware of problems or stress you are going through.
- Make sure you maintain a well-balanced diet as this will help you to feel and cope better.
- It is important to exercise regularly by taking a walk or exercising in the home.
- Try to get enough sleep.
- Visit your doctor as soon as possible if you feel anxious or depressed.
- Take care when lifting the cared for person to ensure you do not damage your back.

Other areas include:

- Practical problems
- Emotions
- Coping strategies
- Sense of recognition as a Carer

Coping Strategies and Compensations

In devising strategies for coping with the stresses of caring at home, important issues to consider include:

- The Carer’s reasons for caring.
- How and why the Carer is confined to the home.
- Each Carer’s way of keeping in touch.
- Public and Personal appreciation.
- The way in which the Carer as an individual copes with difficult situations.
- Carers worst fears.

Health and Emotions

In addressing the Carer’s health and emotional needs, issues to be considered include:

- What are the conflicting demands?
- Being on call 24 hours-a-day for years.
- The dependency of other people on the Carer.
- Lack of choice.
- When and where does the duty of the Carer stop?
- The expectations and understandings of Irish society of ‘family’, ‘Carer’ and the role of the Carer in society.
- The dignity of the Carer and the cared-for person.
- The physical health of the Carer, e.g. back care and muscle strain.
- The patronising of Carers by people who mean well.
- The denial of the Carer’s right to be angry
- The sense of isolation and having to ‘soldier on because we are powerless’.
- The fine line between being seen as having a legitimate right to complain and being seen as whining.

Carers Are Important

Family Carers Ireland can help to overcome the sense of isolation and despair. Life can be better especially if you can get some time to yourself away from the caring situation.
FAMILY CARERS IRELAND CAN HELP YOU

National Freephone CareLine 1800 24 07 24 for a confidential chat with someone who cares about you.

Pamper Days - ‘treat yourself’ to a day off and enjoy yourself with other Carers.

Recognition and Awards - Carers of the Year Awards & Young Carer of the Year Awards.

Coping with Loss - help with coming to terms with the loss of the person for whom you cared.

Surfing the Net - come in to our local Carers Resource Centre and have a look at the Internet

Resource Centre - if you are in town, drop in and have a cup of tea, leave your shopping with us for a while, relax, make a few telephone calls you might not be able to make from home and find out what other Carers are doing.

Empowerment - Information is power. We can provide you with information and contacts which you need e.g. on how to get Carer’s Allowance, an adaptation or extension to your home, grant-aid towards an adapted vehicle for a person with a disability, education and training services, medical cards.

Work Opportunities - Carers on Carer’s Allowance can work in paid employment for up to 15 hours per week. We may be able to provide the supports which allow you to take up part-time work.

(Note: Income from work may be considered as means).
Carer Groups - Where Carers can meet other Carers in similar situations, gain information on entitlements, legal issues, health and nutrition etc., gain support and advice from Family Carers Ireland.

These meetings help to reduce isolation that Carers feel both socially and geographically.

Carers need to consider their own needs as well as those of the person they care for. If their health begins to suffer, caring will become more difficult and it will not be easy or possible in some cases to do the things they need to do.