



How to cope when supporting someone else

This resource explains how to cope when supporting someone else, giving practical suggestions for what you can do and where you can go for support.

If you require this information in Word document format for compatibility with screen readers, please email: publications@mind.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

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.

Note: throughout this resource we've used the words 'they' and 'them' to refer to the person you are supporting.

Caring and the benefits system

The benefits system only defines you as a carer if you meet the criteria for [Carers Allowance](#) (the main welfare benefit for carers in the UK).

But even if you don't meet this criteria, you may still be considered a carer by your local authority (council), and have needs for additional support. See our legal page on [carers' social care rights](#) for more information.

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

Caring 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 someone else.

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 like 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.

Sometimes they may not accept they need care or support from you. This can make things extra hard. Have a look at our info on [what to do when they won't get help](#) or they push you away and say things that upset you.

"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."

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. Have a look at our section on supporting someone with a mental health problem 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](#) can help you find local services near you.

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 them, you may also find it difficult and upsetting.

Below is a list of challenges that you might face. If you think any of these are affecting you, have a look at our sections on looking after yourself and support for you.

- Stress and worry
- Anxiety
- Less time for yourself
- Isolation

- Money worries
- Lack of sleep
- Depression
- Frustration, anger and guilt
- Low self esteem

"I got no support and I didn't really know that there was anywhere or anyone I could turn to. It had a huge impact on my mental health. I developed obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), anxiety and depression."

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 and you can become unwell.

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.

Less (or no) time for yourself

You'll probably have less time to look after yourself (for example 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. Have a look at our section on looking after yourself and our information on the people and organisations that can help you.

"The hardest thing for me is I can never forget I am a carer. Even if I get some 'me time', first I have to organise alternative care and if I can't get it, I have to cancel what I wanted to do."

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 like 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](#).

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.

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.

Some carers say that they feel they have learnt more about their own strengths and helped other people understand the illness, problem or disability. Others get a huge sense of satisfaction knowing that they are making a real difference to the life of the person they care for.

Through your experience of supporting someone else, you may find that you become more confident in dealing with other people and more understanding of others with problems.

Caring could also mean you become closer to friends and family or meet new people who can help.

"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]."

Supporting someone with a mental health problem

If you support someone with a mental health problem, you may face slightly different or extra challenges. We've listed some of these challenges along with tips and suggestions that have helped other people.

- I've never really seen myself as a carer
- I don't think I help much
- I don't really understand what they are going through
- I'm worried I'm doing the wrong thing
- They won't get help – but their behaviour is making life a struggle
- They push me away or say things that upset me
- Our relationship is changing
- It's really hard to get them the help they need
- I'm worried about their safety
- I'm worried about what other people think
- Caring for a young person with a mental health problem

"Caring for someone with a mental health condition is hard. The invisibility of the illness can make it feel like you're not a "real" carer. Trust me: you are. And you're making a huge difference to someone's life."

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 information.

[Read Kate's blog on caring for her husband with bipolar.](#)

"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 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. They may want to look at our [information](#), [blogs](#) and [short films](#) to find something that puts it into the right words for them.

You might find it helpful to have a look at these kinds of resources as well. Learning about a mental health problem and hearing from other people can really help you understand what someone is experiencing and how you can help.

[Read George's blog about how he came to understand his girlfriend's depression and how he supports her.](#)

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 our online resources on different diagnoses have a section for [friends and family](#), which can be a good place to start.

The person you care for might not always be able 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.

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. For example, you could have a look at Mind's [Elefriends](#) community.

They won't seek help – but their behaviour is making life a struggle

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.

It's important to accept that there are always limits to what you can do to support them.

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 things 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.

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 some useful information about [what information health professionals can share with you](#) and how you can make sure that you plan for times when they are unwell.

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. Try to remember that they are dealing with difficult moods, emotions or experiences. Take some time out if you are finding things too difficult. It may also help to talk to friends, family or other carers for support.

Your mental health is important too. You need to decide how much support you can offer and when you need to put your own needs first.

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.

[Read Clare's blog about how her and her husband manage their mental health together.](#)

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

The mental health system is complicated and severely underfunded. You may find yourself having to fight for the right support for them. Our information on [supporting someone else to seek help](#) may be useful. You may also find it helpful to have a look at our information on [advocacy](#).

I'm worried about their safety

If you are worried that they may harm themselves or others, you may find it helpful to have a look at our information on [helping someone who is self-harming](#) and [what you can do in an emergency](#).

It can be very emotionally draining to be worried about the safety of someone you love. It's important to make sure you [support yourself too](#).

I'm worried about what other people think

You might be worried about how other people will treat them – or how they will treat you as a carer.

Stigma and misunderstanding can be upsetting, especially if it comes from friends or family, colleagues or even healthcare professionals. It can make mental health problems feel difficult to talk about but it's important to remember you are not alone.

Here are some options for you to think about:

- Show people Mind's information to help them understand more about mental health.
- Talk about your experience. [Sharing your story](#) can help improve people's understanding and change their attitudes.
- Know your rights. Our [pages on legal rights](#) provide more information.
- Take action by campaigning with Mind. See our [campaigning page](#) for details of the different ways you can get involved with helping us challenge stigma.

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 and help is available. 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 have some really helpful information in their [Parents Survival Guide](#) and their [information for parents who are worried about their child](#). They also have a [Parents Helpline](#) you can contact for free confidential advice.

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.

"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."

Here are 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.

- Talk about how you feel
- Ask for help if you need it
- Be realistic
- Stay organised
- Support their independence
- Find positives in your relationship
- Take a break and make time for yourself
- Get enough sleep
- Learn a relaxation technique
- Look after your physical health

You could also have a look at our information on [how to improve your mental wellbeing](#).

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. Have a look at our section on the people who can help you and 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.

You can talk to the [Samaritans](#) 24 hours a day. They are there to listen and to help you find a way through.

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](#)
- contact the [Carers UK helpline](#)
- look for [someone to talk to online](#) – for example on the [Carers UK forum](#) or [Carers Trust online community](#).

Not all these options will feel right for you. If you are feeling isolated or alone it might also help to have a look at our info on [coping with loneliness](#).

"Try to find someone you can be honest with about your feelings, without judgement."

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.

You might also find it useful to have a look at our section on people and places who can help you.

"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."

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 try to:

- 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.

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 and 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.

You may also find it helpful to look at the [Carer's Trust relationship guide](#).

Take a break and make time for yourself

Try and take a break, especially if you are worried about your own mental health. 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. The Carer's Trust has more information about [the help you can get to take a break](#).

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.

"I run and wonder how many of the other runners I see out are running away from difficulties! Never compare yourself to others, at best we are all muddling along."

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.

"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. I would also have looked after my own wellbeing as a priority and maintained my friendships and family relationships."

Get enough sleep

Lack of sleep can make it more difficult to cope with day to day challenges and can make stress and depression worse. Have a look at our pages on [how to cope with sleep problems](#).

Learn a relaxation technique

Relaxation techniques can help you feel more rested. Have a look at our pages on [relaxation](#). Most of these techniques can be done for just a few minutes each day.

Look after your physical health

It's important to try and make time to look after your physical health as best you can. Try and eat as healthily as you can and do some kind of regular physical activity. Our information pages on [food and mood](#) and [physical activity](#) has suggestions to help you fit things into a busy daily routine.

"I have come up with my own saying, which is "you have to make your own normal". Your life changes so much as a carer and you have to make a new life for yourself. You do not want to feel excluded from life, so you make your own normal."

What support can I get?

There are organisations who can help make things easier for you. In this section we have listed some places and people who could offer you extra support.

Unfortunately, lack of funding means 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.

Stay aware of your mental health

- [Your GP](#). It's always ok to seek help, even if you are not experiencing a specific mental health problem. Our page on [seeking help for a mental health problem](#) has more information about how your GP can help and what might happen in an appointment.
- [Talking treatments](#) 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, without having to feel guilty for expressing the difficult or frustrating parts.

- [Resources in our mental health A–Z](#) can give you a lot of specific advice about getting help for different mental health problems.

"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."

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 your needs and the needs of the person you are looking after. This will be decided through a carers assessment. For more information about carers assessments, see our legal page on [\(adult\) carers' social care rights](#). You can also find more information for both adult and young carers on the [Carers UK website](#).
- **Financial support.** You may be able to get some money to help you. This could include carers allowance and/or housing and council tax benefits. The person that 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. You might find it helpful to use [Turn2us](#) to check what benefits or grants you might be eligible for. [Citizens Advice](#) can help if you are having problems.
- **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.
- **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](#).
- **Technology** is being developed to make it easier to look after someone else. Carers UK has information on these [new technologies](#) and how they could help you.

"My GP says caring is a marathon not a sprint, so pace yourself accordingly!"

Useful contacts

Mind's services

- **Helplines** – all our helplines provide information and support by phone and email. Our Blue Light Infoline is just for emergency service staff, volunteers and their families.

- Mind's Infoline – 0300 123 3393, info@mind
- Mind's Legal Line – 0300 466 6463, legal@mind
- Blue Light Infoline – 0300 303 5999, bluelightinfo@mind
- **Local Minds** – there are over 140 local Minds across England and Wales which provide services such as [talking treatments](#), [peer support](#), and [advocacy](#). [Find your local Mind here](#), and contact them directly to see how they can help.
- **Elefriends** is a supportive online community for anyone experiencing a mental health problem. See our [Elefriends page](#) for details.

Carers Trust

[carers.org](#)

Information and support for carers. They've also produced a resource called [The Carers Trust Relationship Guide](#).

Carers UK

0808 808 7777

[carersuk.org](#)

advice@carersuk.org

Independent information and support for carers.

Citizens Advice

[citizensadvice.org.uk](#)

Advice on legal issues, money and other problems.

Elefriends

[elefriends.org.uk](#)

A supportive online community where you can be yourself.

NHS Choices: Carers Direct

0300 123 1053

[nhs.uk/carersdirect](#)

Information from the NHS on support available to carers.

Rethink Mental Illness

0300 5000 927

[rethink.org](#)

Information for carers including a carer's assessment pack, message board and sibling support network.

Royal College of Psychiatrists

[rcpsych.ac.uk](#)

Advice and information to improve the lives of people with mental illness.

Samaritans

Freepost RSRB-KKBY-CYJK

Chris PO Box 90 90

Stirling FK8 2SA

24-hour helpline: 116 123 (freephone)

jo@samaritans.org

samaritans.org

24-hour emotional support for anyone struggling to cope.

Time to Change

time-to-change.org.uk

Information on anti stigma campaigns around mental health.

Turn2Us

turn2us.org.uk/your-situation/carers

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

Young Minds

Parents helpline: 0808 802 5544

youngminds.org.uk

Information and support on mental health for young people and their parents.

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References are available on request.