

1. AM I REALLY A CARER?

You may be a husband or wife looking after a partner, a son or daughter looking after a parent, a parent looking after a child - someone who has an illness, disability or is frail from age. You may be a friend or neighbour looking after someone nearby, but...

YOU ARE ALSO A CARER

Recognise yourself

One first important step is to recognise that **you** are a carer; that you have extra responsibilities, but that at the same time you have your own needs.

Caring for someone can be rewarding, but it is often hard work. Help at the right time can make a big difference and can be an important way a carer can help the person they care for. Asking for support does not mean you can't cope. It might in fact help you cope even better and with less stress.

Looking after yourself

It is so important, both for you and the person you care for, that you look after your own health and keep as well as possible.

Caring is stressful

We all feel stressed at times, but the strain of caring can add extra pressures. There may be anxieties about having enough money, for example to pay for the extra heating and other needs, as well as dealing with stressful situations such as frequent disturbances at night, incontinence, wandering or aggression. Sometimes family relationships can cause problems too. You can have feelings of guilt, resentment and anger and you may feel very much on your own. All these feelings may seem worse because of stress and exhaustion. Your physical and mental health may begin to break down,

possibly leading to headaches, stomach or back pain, skin problems or frequent infections. Everything can seem out of proportion and you may feel angry and depressed.

However, by looking after yourself, you may be able to prevent minor health problems becoming major illnesses.

RELIEVING THE PRESSURES

Give yourself a break

Everyone needs time for themselves - to sort out those little jobs, to go shopping, go to the pub, enjoy a hobby or just to put your feet up - without feeling guilty. Saying you can't be there all the time, all day, every day, is not saying you don't care.

Getting relief care is not always easy, but do try (see sections on Adult & Community Services, Helping You Care at Home, Getting a Break, Social Activities and Alternatives to Caring at Home for more ideas). Often someone different coming into the house means you both have someone else to talk to.

Letting someone else take over

It can be difficult for both the carer and the person they look after to 'hand over' to someone else. Following that first, sometimes difficult time, many carers come to realise that the person they care for also benefits from their being able to let go. New people to talk to, or new things to do, can be a pleasure. If you can relax when the person you care for either goes to a day centre, or away for respite, this can often make things easier for you both in the long term.

Sitting Service/Respite Service

This service can give carers the opportunity to go out for a few hours, knowing that the person they care for is safe with some care and companionship. *Worcestershire Association of Carers*

or the *Worcestershire Carers' Unit* will be able to provide you with further information about this.

There are currently three types of service available for the following cared-for persons: over 18 years with a physical, visual or hearing disability or over 55 years with some degree of mental and/or physical disability:

1. A regular sitting service without personal care or: for those carers who have had a Carer's Assessment
2. A voucher scheme for sits which include personal care
3. A 'one-off' sit with or without personal care

Some voluntary organisations also offer a sitter service.

Dealing with conflict

What do you do when things get too much? Saying "no" to someone we care for is never easy. It is probably best to try to avoid conflict and arguing, even when you know you are in the right. If possible, go out of the room or into the garden for a while, giving you both a little space to calm down and think things through.

With some conditions, like Alzheimer's Disease, the cared-for person may become difficult and argumentative. Being criticised or accused of different things may make you question whether you are doing things for the best. Do ask for professional advice or contact some of the specialist organisations mentioned in this handbook. It helps to be reassured that it is not you but the condition that is the problem.

Arguments can happen in any family, particularly for those under a number of stresses. Often there are disagreements on

how things should be done, or divided loyalties. Painful and difficult situations are sometimes allowed to go on for far too long. It can take a lot of courage to face one another and get things out into the open.

Managing changes

Caring often brings with it a lot of changes. Starting to care may involve leaving a job or changing your home situation. Having less time may mean you cut yourself off from friends or hobbies - sources of support. Try to make some time for yourself each day; to congratulate yourself on your successes and to forgive yourself for the mistakes.

If you have been caring for a while, it may be the changes in the person you care for that are difficult to deal with. You may feel as if you are grieving for the loss of the person you loved and knew. This may seem strange, but is perfectly normal. It can be hard to bear and it may be that talking to a counsellor could help.

A chance to relax

Using simple relaxation exercises can help you cope with the daily build up of stress. For example, try closing your eyes and breathing very slowly and deeply. Empty your mind by counting to five as you breathe in and five as you breathe out. Concentrate on your breathing and try to relax as you breathe out. Alternatively, if you can get out of the house, join classes such as yoga, meditation or massage.

A sense of humour

The best medicine is often a laugh and many carers say that a sense of humour has enabled them to manage through difficult times. Sharing experiences and laughter with others in a similar situation can be an effective tonic. Carers groups give an opportunity to share things with others who know how you feel. *Worcestershire Association of Carers* hosts a number of

carer groups and can provide details of other carer groups existing within Worcestershire. If you feel you would like to attend a carer group please contact *Worcestershire Association of Carers*. Members are carers or former carers and welcome your support and friendship.

Joining with others

Having one or two understanding friends, who may also be carers, can be of great benefit especially at a time when professionals are not available. Being able to talk to someone on the end of the phone can make all the difference between being able to cope with a situation, or not.

In the county, Worcestershire Association of Carers, as an independent organisation, works to support carers by providing information, advice, and guidance for carers through a helpline scheme and also through carers support groups across the county and through training in moving & handling. The Association also sponsors a GP Carers registration card and consults with and represents carers to the statutory services. In association with Worcestershire County Council they also publish a free quarterly newsletter and co-ordinate a Carers' Emergency Card.

The *Worcestershire Carers Unit*, operated through the Council's Adult and Community Services, provides a range of direct services including the co-ordination of the County's Sitter Services, Direct Payments for Carers and a range of specific training courses.

Carers UK works at a national level, providing a free carers' helpline, website, online carers chat room and a wide range of free information including quarterly 'Caring' magazine. *The Princess Royal Trust for Carers* also offers information and support to carers. There is also a chat room and message board facility available through their website.