

A First Steps guide to

Emotional health for carers

Introduction

This booklet aims to give information on improving and maintaining emotional health for people who are unpaid carers.

A carer is someone of any age who provides unpaid support to family or friends who could not manage without this help. This could be caring for a relative, partner or friend who is ill, frail, disabled or has mental health or substance misuse problems.

Anyone can become a carer; carers come from all walks of life, all cultures and can be of any age. Many feel they are doing what anyone else would in the same situation; looking after their mother, son, or best friend and just getting on with it.

Carers don't choose to become carers: it just happens and they have to get on with it.

The Princess Royal Trust for Carers

"Always on call. Always concerned. All the extra work, washing, cooking, etc"

"One is always worried. The longer I care, the less friends I keep. Many have drifted away. This was something I thought might happen"

"Stress, lack of freedom, mental strain because my husband has mood swings. Life isn't the same"

..are just a few of the feelings expressed during some recent research by the Princess Royal Trust for Carers.

It is normal to experience emotional distress when caring for somebody. A carers health study found that 77% of carers felt mentally/emotionally drained (Princess Royal Trust for Carers). No two people are the same and everyone will cope differently. This is not to say that one person is any better or worse than another but just that what you are feeling is probably normal. This does not mean that you have to accept that this is the way life is. When talking about managing emotions there are very few right or wrong ways of coping. However there are some strategies that can help a person to feel better in themselves. This booklet provides some ideas to try if your current way of managing is not working for you as well as you might like.

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The brave face

Many people feel a need to put on a 'brave face'. It can feel that your difficulties are 'nothing' compared to that of the person you are caring for. In addition, support from family, friends and statutory organisations are usually aimed at the person you are caring for so it can be easy for a carer to neglect their own physical and emotional health.

Gains and consequences of the 'brave face'

Gains

- Not facing your emotions
- Nobody needs to know how you are feeling
- Maintain 'face' with others
- No effort is required to make changes



Consequences

- Feeling isolated and alone
- Leaving yourself vulnerable to others opinions
- Nothing changes
- Impact on caring
- Decreased confidence and self-esteem
- Impact on relationships
- Impact on your health

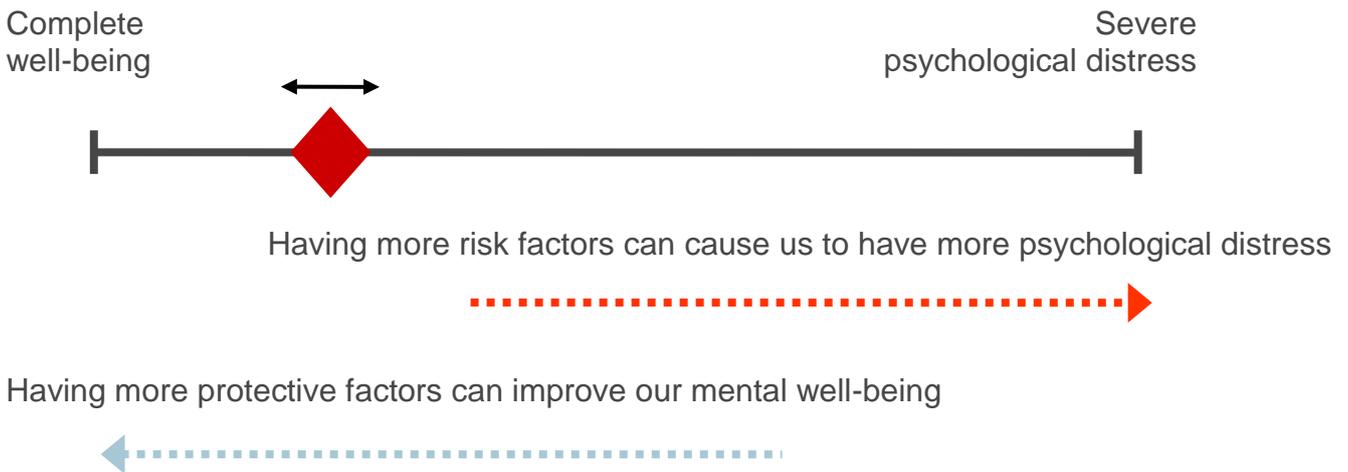
What is emotional health?

Emotional health is:

A state of well-being in which the individual realises his or her own abilities, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his/her community (World Health Organisation)

As with physical health, our emotional health is on a continuum which we are continuously moving up and down. Emotional distress is not the same as a mental illness. A mental illness is a diagnosable illness where as emotional distress is a way that you feel. A person may have a severe mental illness such as schizophrenia, but is living a fulfilled and happy life, therefore has high emotional health. Likewise a person may have no diagnosable mental illness, but is feeling stressed and struggling with everyday tasks and therefore has a low emotional health.

Mental health continuum



We can all move up and down the continuum throughout our lifetime

Risk factors include:

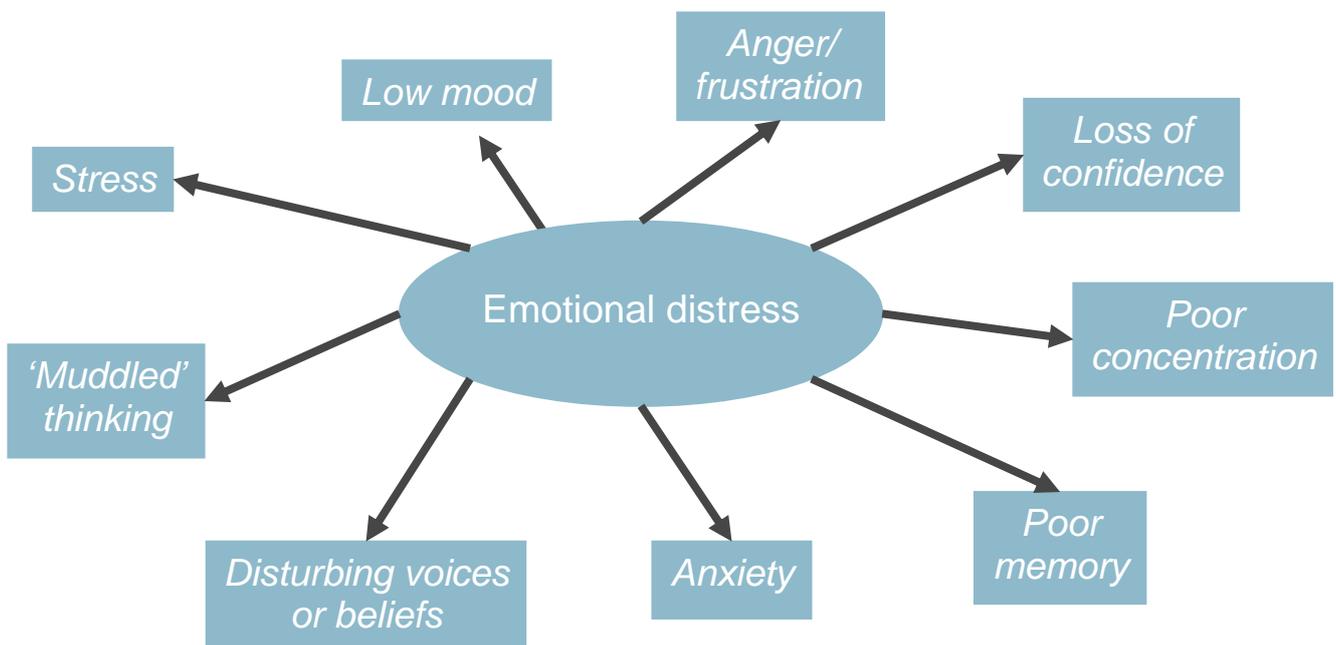
Bereavement, family history of mental ill health, family breakdown, financial strain, unemployment, long-term caring, illness, childhood neglect, abuse, bullying, low self-esteem, violence, victim/fear of crime.

We can decrease risk by strengthening our protective factors.

Protective factors include:

Supportive family/friends, economic security, employment, good physical health, optimism, problem solving skills, opportunities in life, physical activity, sense of community/belonging.

Emotional distress can present itself in many ways



Roles

We are often defined by our roles. How often would you introduce yourself or a friend and mention a role that they have?

“Hi, this is Gina, she works at First Steps”

“Hi, this is my sister Jane”

Roles could be, to name but a few:

- Son/daughter/parent/grandparent
- Employer/employee
- Carer
- Club/team member
- Community member
- Volunteer
- Friend

Roles give us a sense of purpose and belonging as well as an identity. Our roles evolve throughout our lives; school child, student, employee, mother, grandmother etc. These changes usually create a mix of emotions including anxiety, excitement, happiness and sadness. We are usually able to embrace our new roles and find satisfaction and happiness, although this may take time for us to adjust. When a role is lost, our sense of identity, purpose and belonging are often reduced. All of these things will impact on your emotional health.



Caring for someone creates a new role in itself but will also impact on the roles you already have. Many people find themselves stopping work and giving up on their hobbies or community interests as their caring responsibilities increase. It is important to retain your sense of identity. For some people this may be looking at ways of maintaining employment / education and there is support available to do this, (Action for Carers). For others, this may be building a sense of autonomy and self-esteem through the creation of your role as a carer. As with the all previous role changes, this change in role may be difficult at first, but support is available from a number of services (see local services).

It is important to maintain your hobbies, leisure or community interests even if you are unable to dedicate as much time as you may previously have done. Quite often we feel that we will do the things that we enjoy when our situation improves or we feel better. However, if we do not do the things that bring us happiness and pleasure, our happiness and satisfaction will be reduced.

Caring for somebody will also create a change in the 'usual' role and relationship with that person. As with any role change, it is normal for this to create a range of emotions for both the carer and the person being cared for. Becoming a carer for someone close to you can cause a great deal of change in the dynamic of your relationship. It may feel difficult to balance the new role of carer with the existing one, for example becoming a carer for someone who is also your husband or wife. You may become involved in tasks such as personal care, which may not feel like a comfortable fit with the romantic side of your relationship. It is not unusual for feelings such as anger, resentment or frustration to arise on both sides as a result of this. It is important to talk about these feelings between yourselves, but also with an organisation such as your local Carers Support branch if you feel that these emotions are having a detrimental effect on your lives and your relationship.

Anger

Anger is a natural feeling that affects everyone. Things that can make us feel angry include:

- Feeling upset, sad or low in your mood
- Feeling anxious or stressed
- Being tired, hungry or in pain
- Losing someone you love (grief)
- Feeling undervalued
- Feeling misunderstood
- Feeling threatened
- Medical conditions or coming off certain medicines
- Stimulants
- Alcohol
- Sexual frustration
- Feeling out of control
- Situations that feel unfair or unjust



With so many of these causes being an everyday occurrence for many carers, it is easy to see why anger is such a common emotion experienced by carers. The Princess Royal Trust for Carers health survey showed that 74% of carers felt frustrated whilst 59% felt angry.

Mild types of anger can be expressed as annoyance or irritation.

Uncontrolled anger may lead to arguments and physical fights, but sometimes it causes people to 'bottle up' emotions and feel withdrawn. It can cloud your thinking and judgment and may lead to actions that are unreasonable and/or irrational. Uncontrolled anger often leads to feelings of depression and low self-worth.

Guilt

Guilt is an emotion often associated with caring and if you are feeling guilty you are not alone. Feelings of guilt can be created for a number of reasons including:

- Guilt about making decisions for the person you care for regarding their health and social care. This can be especially difficult if things turn out differently to the way you hoped
- Guilt about taking a break or having time for yourself
- Guilt around feeling angry
- Guilt around having fun
- Guilt towards other friends / family members for whom you now have less time
- Guilt that the person you are caring for is unwell and not yourself
- Guilt around feelings of resentment towards the person you care for

Whilst guilt is a common emotion, it is often created by our own expectations of ourselves. This does not mean that the person is to blame, but rather offers hope that the feelings of guilt can be reduced.

Tips for reducing anger and guilt

Valuing yourself

As humans, our performance in any role will be affected by our own emotional health. Caring may have created a change in your role/roles but your personal needs remain the same. Self-esteem and general health are closely linked to activity, achievements and pleasure. Therefore it is important to give yourself permission to look after yourself as:

1. you are worth it as a person
2. your performance in all roles (including caring) will be improved

Be kind to yourself

We are often much harder on ourselves than we are on our friends, family or colleagues. It can be helpful to think of what you may say to a friend if they were in a similar situation. What would you say to the person you care for if your caring roles were reversed?

Control what you can, let go of what you can't

Try to focus your attentions on the elements of the situation that you can change. We cannot always change a situation, but what we can change is the way we think about it or the actions we take. Letting go of a situation beyond your control does not mean that you accept the situation or believe that it is right, but is simply recognition that it is beyond your control and holding on to it is not helpful to you or your loved ones.

Tell others how you feel

Problems can feel smaller if they are shared with someone you trust. It can also help with seeing the situation from a different viewpoint. If we do not talk about our difficulties, people will often second guess the way that we feel and perhaps jump to the wrong conclusion.

Isolation

We are social creatures by nature and feeling isolated can often be detrimental to a person's emotional health. Social isolation refers to a perceived lack of contact with others and a lack of integration with the wider society. It is important to remember that there may be a difference between feeling alone and feeling lonely. Some people prefer to be more solitary than others and this is unlikely to impact on their emotional health in the same way as someone who is feeling very lonely. It is possible to feel lonely even when surrounded by others. If the person you care for was your main companion it can feel very isolating if this person is no longer able to contribute to the relationship in the same way as they have in the past.

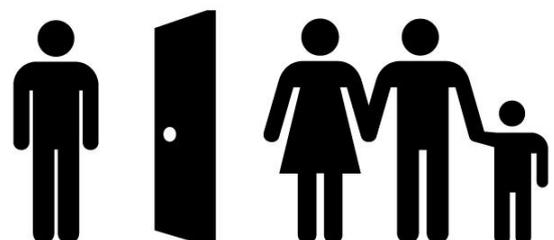
Possible signs and symptoms that develop when someone is feeling isolated:

<p>Physical</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General ill health • Lack of energy • Increased risk of substance or alcohol misuse 	<p>Emotional</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduced confidence • Lower self-esteem • Depression • Anxiety
<p>Cognitive</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shortened attention span • Increased forgetfulness • Feeling indecisive • Thinking negatively 	<p>Behavioural</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoiding being around people • Loss of interests • Eating more or less • Sleeping more or less

For many people isolation and loneliness is often the result of trying to 'manage' during a difficult situation or time of their life. Whilst increasing social contact may present challenges and difficulties in the short term, the longer term benefits will outweigh this.

<p>Short term pros</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Get through the day • Not making yourself feel vulnerable • Not challenging self 	<p>Short term consequences</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pushing yourself when you are already feeling vulnerable • Potentially increasing stress and anxiety
<p>Long term consequences</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nothing changes • Feel more 'stuck' in the situation • Increased loneliness and isolation • Feeling depressed 	<p>Long term pros</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase in emotional health

Reducing feelings of isolation is an important part of maintaining your emotional health. This may be by keeping contact with your existing social networks or finding other like minded people or people who are experiencing a similar situation (see resources)



Stress

Stress is a condition or feeling that is experienced when a person perceives that demands and pressure are more than they can cope with

Everyone experiences stress at certain times in their lives and few of us manage to keep it under control all the time. It can come from both inside or outside of us.

- Inside – These can include feelings and attitudes such as wanting to do your job well, to succeed, to be liked or to make other people happy. These pressures can make you feel worried or angry and sap your energy
- Outside – Stressful events can happen at any time. They include moving house, getting married, loss or change of roles, illness/disability of self or loved ones, difficulties in relationships etc.

Stress can present itself in different ways. The symptoms can be grouped into four categories:

- Cognitive symptoms
- Emotional symptoms
- Physical symptoms
- Behavioural symptoms

Cognitive symptoms	Emotional symptoms
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Memory problems • Indecisiveness • Inability to concentrate • Trouble thinking clearly • Poor judgment • Seeing only the negative • Anxious or racing thoughts • Constant worrying • Loss of objectivity • Fearful anticipation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Moodiness • Agitation • Restlessness • Short temper • Irritability or impatience • Inability to relax • Feeling tense and “on edge” • Feeling overwhelmed • Sense of loneliness and isolation • Depression or general unhappiness
Physical symptoms	Behavioural symptoms
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Headaches/backaches • Muscle tension/stiffness • Diarrhoea/constipation • Nausea/dizziness • Insomnia • Chest pain/rapid heartbeat • Weight gain/weight loss • Skin breakouts (hives, eczema) • Loss of sex drive • Frequent colds • Hot flushes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eating more or eating less • Sleeping too much or too little • Isolating yourself from others • Procrastination, neglecting responsibilities • Using alcohol, cigarettes or drugs to relax • Nervous habits (e.g. nail biting, pacing) • Teeth grinding or jaw clenching • Overdoing activities (e.g. exercising, shopping) • Overreacting to unexpected problems • Picking fights with others

What causes these symptoms?

They are perfectly natural reactions caused by adrenalin. They are automatic responses triggered by the “fight/flight” response, which is designed to keep us safe in times of danger. It does this by getting our body in to the best possible shape to deal with danger quickly, either by running away – flight – or tackling the danger head on – fight. Our bodies evolved during a time when it was essential to react quickly to danger in order to survive. It was very useful to Stone Age man, for example, due to the dangers that were all around him and all his bodily reactions would be working to keep him safe. This can still be useful for example, if we walk step into the road without looking and then notice that a car is coming and we need to get out of the way quickly.

The ‘stress jug’ analogy



As humans, we only have a certain capacity for managing stress. Imagine that all of your stress was in a jug. The fuller your jug is, the greater the symptoms of stress will be. Once the jug is full, your ability to manage any situation that arises is greatly compromised, which is why you may feel less able to cope with matters that would normally have no effect on you.

Some of your jug is already filled with the anxieties of life that we cannot avoid, (i.e. money, illness, family, not having enough time for yourself, etc). If you have a large source of stress in one area of your life that is filling your jug e.g. your caring role, your capacity to manage stress in the other areas will be compromised. You may feel that you manage your stressful role as a carer very well, for example, but feel that you are unable to cope with any stresses at home/work or vice versa.

If you partially empty your jug on a daily basis, you can avoid it ‘over-flowing’ which will help you to reduce your symptoms and to feel more in control. It may be that you are unable to change the main contributor to your stress, but if you can do something about your other sources of stress, you will feel better able to cope.

You can empty a little out of your jug on a daily basis by using self-help techniques to:

- Look at your stressors to see if there is anything you can do to reduce the level of stress they produce or if you could manage them in a different way
- Identify if the stressful situation is really your responsibility. If not, could it be delegated to someone else or could your energy be better used elsewhere?
- Have time to relax. This may be by completing a relaxation routine, playing a sport or socialising, etc

Low mood

One in four people will experience a depressive illness in their lifetime, whilst everybody will experience feeling low in their mood. The prevalence of depression in carers is higher than that of the national average (Princess Royal Trust for Carers). Symptoms of low mood can vary greatly from person to person. Some people will experience feelings of sadness or feel tearful whilst others may feel anger or agitation. Sadly feelings of hopelessness and suicide are common but should be taken seriously. If you are experiencing these thoughts it is important to seek help.

Talk to your GP about the way that you feel as soon as possible or contact one of the crisis contacts below.

Crisis line: 0300 456 83 42

Samaritans: 08457 90 90 90



Bereavement

Everybody experiences and copes with bereavement differently. It is important to give yourself time to grieve in the way that feels right to you. You are not alone, although it may feel like you are at the time. As well as potential support from friends/family help is available from a number of sources including:

- Your GP
- Information from First Steps
- Local support groups
- Religious groups
- Cruse Bereavement Counselling

Life after caring

There may be a number of reasons that your caring role changes. The person you care for may move into care, a young person may move into further education, the person you care for may need more support than you are able to give or sadly the person may die. It is normal to experience feelings of grief and as with any major role change; it can take a long time to adjust.

Some useful things to think about are:

- What are my roles now?
- What do I need to do?
 - Activities of daily living
 - Finances etc
- What have I done before that has helped when things have been difficult?
- What would I like to do?
- Who can support me?

Financial difficulties

Being a carer can create some financial difficulties and it is important to seek support if your finances are a worry to you. Financial difficulties can be a large contributor to your stress jug and have a big impact on your emotional health.

“Over one in three (37%) of carers do not want to wake up in the morning because of dire financial circumstances” The Princess Royal Trust for Carers.

It can be beneficial to speak with your local citizen’s advice bureau to ensure that you are getting all the benefits that you may be entitled to as a carer. If you are over 55, Age UK also provides free advice on this topic.



Young carers

Young carers are children and young persons under 18 who provide, or intend to provide, care, assistance or support to another family member. The 2011 Census showed that there are approximately 175,000 young carers in the UK.

Despite the high numbers of young carers many children, teenagers and young adults find themselves feeling isolated and alone.

If you are a young carer it is important that you meet other young carers and are offered the support and help that you need.

Carers of children with a disability

Caring for a disabled child can create many challenges that are different from caring for an adult although the affect these challenges have on our emotions are often similar. Some common challenges are:

- **Loss of normal parental role.** Parents expect to provide all care for their baby. The parental role can begin to change as your child grows and develops but may still be dependent on you for some aspects of their care. As with any role change, It can be difficult for both the parent and the child and also any siblings who may or may not have a disability
- **Milestones.** First steps, first day at school, moving out- are all anticipated milestones when you have a child. However, for a child with disabilities these milestones may be delayed, altered or for some, may never happen. It is important to recognise and celebrate your child's own milestones and not compare them to others or what you perceive as the 'norm'. All children are different, regardless of any disability, and recognising and celebrating this can enhance the emotional health of the whole family
- **Letting go.** Many parents find it difficult to 'let go' as their child develops and starts to desire a life of their own. This can be particularly difficult if your child has a disability. Challenging your fears/ thoughts and recognising that it is normal to feel the way that you do, can be helpful. Talking to other families in a similar situation may be helpful
- **Future worries.** Many parents worry about the care of their son/daughter in the future. These fears are unpleasant, but normal. Taking control of the elements of the situation that you can control eg. making future plans and letting go of the elements that you can't may be helpful (see page 8)

Looking after your emotional health

Some things to remember.....

- Accept and care for yourself. You are a mixture of strengths and weaknesses. Find the parts of yourself that you like, remind yourself of these. Be kind to yourself. Avoid perfectionism. Do not judge yourself harshly or compare yourself unfavourably with others. Avoid using guilt inducing words such as “should” or “ought” to yourself
- Control what you can, let go of what you can't. Try to focus your attentions on the elements of the situation that you can change. We can not always change a situation, but what we can change is the way we think about it or the actions we take
- Make time for activities that bring you pleasure. Develop hobbies that are challenging and absorbing. This may not be easy to fit in around your caring responsibilities but is essential in maintaining your emotional health
- Value and nurture friendships. Develop a network of support that includes people with whom you feel relaxed and can be yourself. This includes maintaining contact with existing friends. Laughter is very therapeutic. Accept others for what they are, rather than trying to change them
- Recognise your early warning signs that your stress jug is filling and take action to prevent problems escalating. Seek professional help when necessary
- Equip yourself with a set of tools to use at times of difficulties
- As with any skill, self-help techniques require practice and are best learnt when you're not experiencing difficulties

Negative thoughts

The impact of negative thinking on emotional health

- Sometimes we are right in what we say to ourselves. Often, however, we are more harsh and unjust with ourselves than we would ever be with our friends, family or co-workers
- This, along with other negative thinking, can cause intense stress and unhappiness and can severely damage our self-confidence



Common unhelpful thinking styles

Jumping to conclusions

This is where we make a negative interpretation of an event, even though we do not know all the facts.

“Bob looks miserable today, it must be something I have done”

Catastrophizing

An extreme form of jumping to a negative conclusion, where the importance of an event is exaggerated to become a catastrophe.

*“I was late giving Jane her breakfast this morning. I am a terrible carer.
Maybe others will feel that I am not capable and she’ll be taken into care.
She will hate it and it will all be my fault”*

All or nothing

Thinking in black and white terms and not allowing for any ‘grey’ areas.

“If I can’t dedicate as much time to my hobby as before, there is no point in doing it at all”

Personalising/labelling

Seeing ourselves as the cause of some negative external event or taking the view that we are to blame.

*“Katy ignored me when I said hello today. Maybe she doesn’t like me any more
as I couldn’t go to her dinner party”*

Discounting positives

Focusing on negatives and not giving praise for the positive things we do.

“Ok, so I look after Julie well. That’s only what’s expected of me as her husband”

“Should” statements

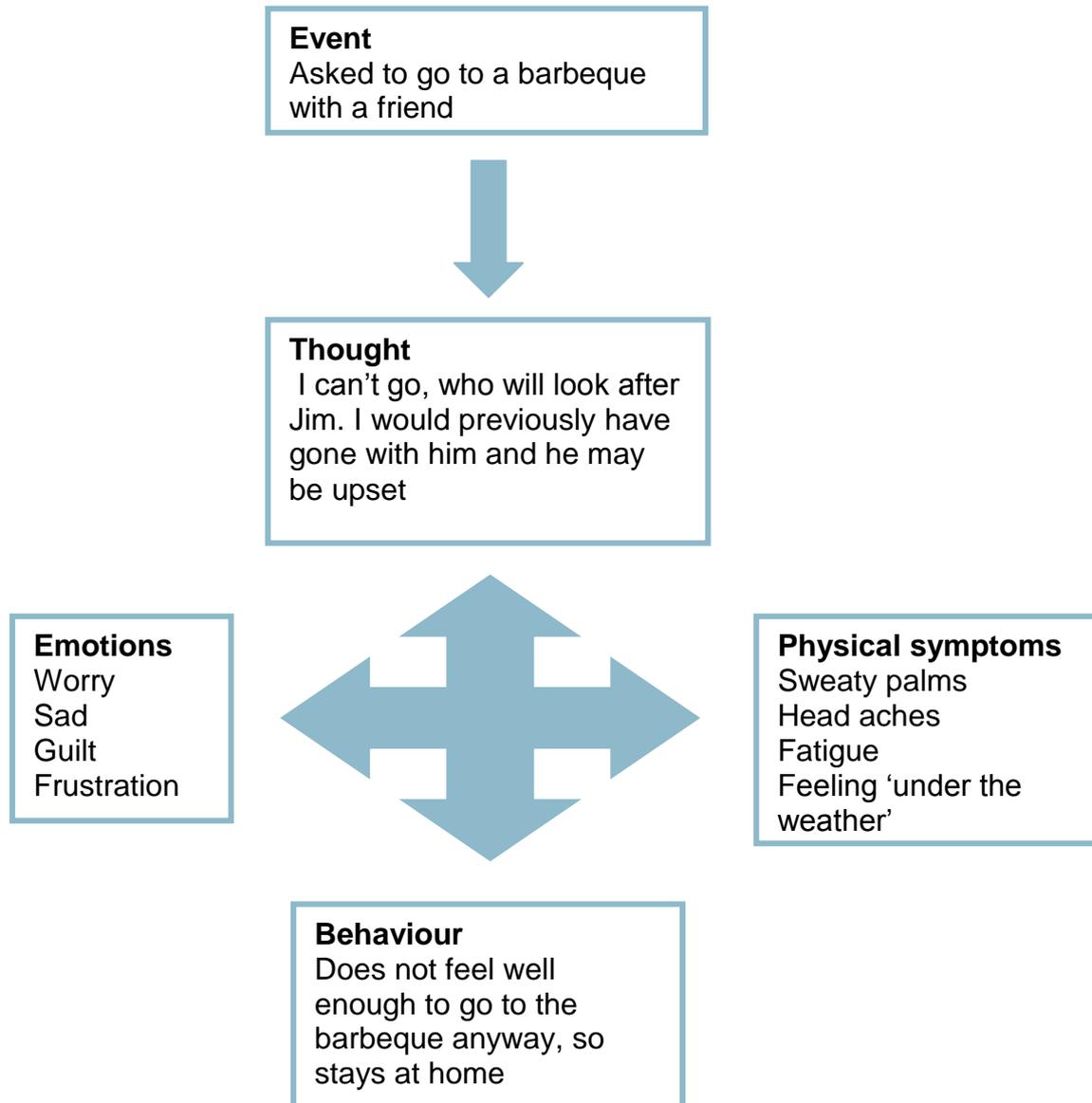
Trying to motivate yourself with ‘should’, ‘must’ and ‘ought’ statements places unnecessary pressure and expectations on your self. These pressures are unhelpful and can lead to feelings of failure.

“I should be able to cope with this; I used to be able to”

Challenging negative thoughts

- Is your thought rational?
- Is your thought unhelpful?
- What is the evidence for your thought?
- What is the evidence against your thought?
- What would you say to a friend or colleague if they were in your situation?
- How can you rephrase your thought to include positive affirmations?

An example of how thoughts affect the way you feel



So what else can I do?

Ask for support

This could be from your friends/family, a charity or local service (see resources). This could be support in your role as a carer, emotional support, practical support or a listening ear. Carers of any age are legally entitled to an assessment of their own needs by the Local Authority in order to help them with their caring role and also enable them to have a life outside of caring. This will look specifically at your needs and may be able to offer you support in balancing your caring role with your own health and well-being.

Set boundaries and keep your expectations of yourself realistic

Be realistic about what you can achieve and communicate this with the people around you. Setting unrealistic expectations of yourself will make achieving what you need to do more difficult and affect your emotional and physical health. What would you say to a friend in a similar situation? Quite often our expectations of ourselves are far higher than those we would expect of others. Thinking of advice you may give to a friend if they were in a similar situation can be helpful.

Communicate effectively

A problem shared (with the right person) is a problem halved! Talking things through can help others to understand what you are thinking and feeling and help you to feel valued and heard. Learning to say no is an important strategy both in your personal life and work place. If things don't go as you would like, try not to take the situation personally; it will not be helpful to you in managing the situation.

To help you get started with this, it may be useful to remind yourself that you have the right to...

1. Express your feelings	8. Make reasonable requests of others
2. Express your opinions	9. Set your own priorities
3. Say 'yes' and 'no' for yourself	10. Be listened to and taken seriously
4. Change your mind	11. Make mistakes and feel comfortable about admitting them
5. Say 'I don't understand'	12. Be illogical in making decisions and accept the consequences
6. Be yourself without having to act for the benefit of others	13. Say 'I don't care' and accept the consequences
7. Not declare responsibility for other people's problems	14. Be miserable or cheerful

Think about how much you believe each of these rules.

How much do you put them into practice in your own life at the moment?

*Note that this is not about feeling comfortable with saying or hearing "no."
Rather, it is about feeling comfortable with feeling uncomfortable.*

How to say no...

Practicing these techniques may be helpful:

- **Direct no:** Say no without apologising
 - “No, thank you”.
 - This way is quite forceful and can be effective with salespeople or people who are being quite pushy
- **Reflecting no:** Reflecting back the content and feeling of the request, but adding your assertive refusal at the end
 - “I know you were looking forward to a walk this afternoon, but I can’t come”
- **Reasoned no:** Very briefly, give your genuine reason for the refusal
 - “I can’t do that for you because I’ve already arranged to do something else”
- **Rain check no:** Say no to the present request, but leave room for negotiation
 - “I can’t do that for you now, because I wanted to do something else, but I will do it for you next time if you can give me a bit of notice”
- **Enquiring no:** Not a direct no, but a request for more information or an alternative
 - “Do you need that to be done for you now or can it be done later?”
- **Broken record no:** Repeat a simple statement of refusal over and over again if the requester is very persistent
 - “I’d like to be able to help you out, I just don’t feel I can at the moment”... “As I said, I just don’t feel I can at the moment”... “I appreciate what you’re saying; I just can’t help at the moment”

Breathing control

- Taking a deep breath at times of difficulty gives you time to recompose yourself and gather your thoughts, whilst reducing your physical symptoms
- Irregular or erratic breathing is one of the first responses to severe stress. Unfortunately, this may make you feel more panicky, as you feel the need to gasp for air, which in turn makes you more anxious. However, with practice, your breathing is easy to control
- Your stomach muscles should rise and fall as you breathe (imagining your lungs as a balloon can be helpful)
 - As you inhale (blow up the balloon) your stomach moves out slightly
 - As you exhale (let down the balloon) your stomach moves in slightly
- It will help to count as you breathe. Breathe in for three counts and out for four counts. Maintain a steady comfortable rhythm and try to avoid holding your breath in between each count



Distraction techniques

Taking a few minutes out of the stressful situation will allow you time to think clearly and rationally. Removing yourself from a situation is not always possible or practical. At this time, distraction techniques may be useful. Distraction is only a very short term solution to enable you to feel better able to tackle the situation helpfully. Using distraction as an alternative to facing the problem can cause more difficulties longer term. Try using one of the following:

1. **Mental exercises**, such as counting backwards from a hundred, reciting a poem from memory, practicing your times tables. Anything that makes you focus your concentration away from the stressful thoughts will help.
2. **Physical activity**. Give yourself a practical task to do, such as washing up the coffee cups, doing some photocopying or tidying up. Be sure to focus your attention on the task.
3. **Focusing on your environment**. Choose an object in your immediate environment and concentrate your thoughts on it for a while. Describe the object to yourself; think about its texture, shape, size and colour. Think about the purpose of the object and what makes it unique.
4. **Visualisation**. A quick way of getting away from a situation without physically leaving
 - Imagine yourself walking to a door
 - Open the door and walk down 3 steps, taking a deep breath for each step
 - You walk into an environment that you have come to associate with relaxation and calmness. This could be a familiar place, a happy memory, or somewhere in your dream
 - What can you see?
 - What can you hear?
 - What can you smell?
 - What can you touch?
 - Spend a few minutes in this place, enjoying the feeling of relaxation
 - When you feel ready, start to make your way back up the steps, taking a breath for each of the 3 steps. Make your way back through the door and back into the present situation



Muscle relaxation

Sit comfortably and take a few deep breaths. If you feel any pain or discomfort, then stop and move on to the next muscle group. Now focus on your body, tensing and relaxing each of the muscle groups in the following order:

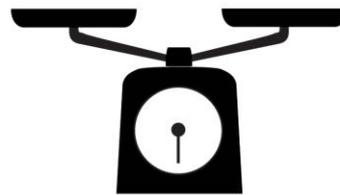
- **Feet** – point your toes away from your body, hold, then relax
- **Calves** – bend your foot at the ankle towards you, hold, then relax
- **Thighs** – push your knees together, hold, then relax
- **Bottom** – clench your buttocks together underneath you, hold, then relax
- **Stomach** – pull in your stomach muscles, hold, then relax
- **Hands** – clench your fists, hold, then relax
- **Hands** (again) stretch the fingers wide apart, hold, then relax
- **Arms** – bend your arms at the elbow, bringing your hands up towards the shoulders, hold, then relax
- **Shoulders** – hunch your shoulders up towards your ears hold, then relax
- **Neck** – pull your chin forwards on to your chest hold, then relax
- **Neck** (again) stretch your chin up, pushing your neck back, hold, then relax
- **Jaw** – clench teeth together, hold, then relax
- **Lips** – press tightly together, hold, then relax
- **Eyes** – screw up eyes tightly, hold, then relax
- **Forehead** – frown hard, wrinkle forehead, hold then relax

In each case, as you relax the muscles feel the tension draining away. Notice the difference between tension and relaxation.

Lifestyle changes

Becoming a carer will likely have an affect on your routine and lifestyle. As with any role, it is important to maintain a balance of the things:

- We have to do for ourselves
- We have to do for others
- We would like to do
- That brings us pleasure
- That mentally challenge us



It can be very difficult to make time for ourselves and to give ourselves permission to do the things that bring us pleasure. Some of the following tips might be helpful:

- Remind yourself that you are worth it!
- Schedule in time for yourself. Making a plan of when you are going to do something, can make it more likely that it will happen
- Look at your weekly schedule to see if there is any way of reducing the time you spend on something else
- **Consider how much more you would have to give others if you were feeling better in yourself!**

Physical activity

- Physical activity is an important means of reducing stress levels and preventing some of its damaging effects on the body
- Physical activity uses up the adrenalin and other hormones that the body produces under stress, and relaxes the muscles
- It will help to strengthen the heart and improve blood circulation
- Physical activity lifts your mood through the release of endorphins
- Physical activity does not have to be at a gym or sports club. For example, take the stairs instead of the lift or walk to the shops. Gardening, dancing, playing with the children and DIY can all be excellent physical exercise

Healthy eating

- Base your meals on starchy (carbohydrate) foods for energy e.g. wholegrain bread/cereal/pasta, brown rice, jacket potatoes
- Eat lots of fruit and vegetables
- Eat at least 1 portion of oily fish per week
- Cut down on saturated fat and sugar – reduces risk of high blood cholesterol and developing cardiovascular disease
- The effects of excess salt, sugar and caffeine can mimic stress responses. Keep your intake of all to a minimum. Guidelines suggest a max of 6g of salt per day for adults
- Drink plenty of water or other fluids
- Cut down on caffeine as it can increase symptoms of anxiety and interfere with sleep – try herbal teas instead
- Do not use alcohol, drugs or cigarettes to cope
- Don't skip breakfast! Feeling hungry can lead to feelings of lethargy, poor concentration and anger



Tips to improve sleep

- Establish a regular routine. This will help to prepare your body to go to sleep. Go to bed only when you are 'sleepy' tired and get up at the same time each day. Avoid napping during the day
- Check your sleeping arrangements. Think about comfort, temperature, light and noise levels
- Learn to de-stress before bed. Dismiss nagging thoughts by writing them down. Have a warm bath, practise a relaxation technique, or listen to a relaxation tape
- Do not eat late. Avoid rich, spicy or sugar-rich foods, red meat and cheese. Choosing wholemeal, low-fat, magnesium-rich foods (green salads, broccoli, nuts and seeds) may encourage sleep, as may drinking hot milk and honey
- Get enough exercise. Evidence shows that people who are fitter sleep better
- Try out complementary remedies. Yoga, meditation, homeopathy or herbal remedies, such as lavender or valerian, may help
- Keep a sleep diary. This helps you identify potential causes for your sleeplessness
- Try some reverse psychology: keep your eyes open and tell yourself to resist sleep
- Interrupt unwanted thoughts by repeating a neutral word to yourself. For example, repeat the word 'the' once or twice every second in your head until you fall asleep
- Visualise a scene or landscape that has pleasant memories for you
- Talk to your GP. Long term use of sleeping pills can present problems, but a brief course is sometimes appropriate



Setting goals

Goals give us a sense of purpose and allow us to achieve tasks that may feel overwhelming or unachievable. The key to effective goal setting is to be realistic. It is easy to make the mistake of trying to achieve a goal that is vague and unrealistic. By setting realistic, clearly defined goals, you can measure and take pride in the achievement of those goals. You can see forward progress in what might previously have seemed a long pointless grind. Your self-confidence will increase as you achieve your goals and as you recognize your ability and competence in your achievements.

There are five components to consider when setting yourself a goal. These goals are known as SMART goals. These are:

	Component	Ask yourself
S	Specific	What exactly do I want to achieve?
M	Measurable	How will I know when I have completed the goal?
A	Achievable	Is this possible given more current situation/performance?
R	Relevant	The goal has to make sense to you and be something you feel is worthwhile and that applies to your views and lifestyle
T	Time bound	When do I plan to finish the task?

Once you have set your goal, you then need to break the main goal down into achievable 'steps' called sub goals. You are far more likely to be successful if you plan a series of small stages which will help you to reach your ultimate goal. By working on and achieving small targets, your confidence will increase far more than if you are trying to achieve goals which are too difficult, and where you run the risk of failing.

Once your time frame has expired you should then add a further 2 components to your goal, making it a SMARTER goal:

	Component	Ask yourself
E	Evaluate	What have I achieved so far? Have I completed my goal?
R	Re-do	What further stages should I set for myself or is this goal now fully achieved? What is my next goal?



Useful contacts and resources

NHS Carers Direct Helpline:

Tel no: 0300 123 1053

Website: www.nhs.uk/carersdirect

First Steps (Surrey based only)

0808 801 0325 - Monday and Wednesday 10 to 4.30pm and Thursday 11 to 5.30pm.

The helpline will be open on a Tuesday following a Bank Holiday

first.steps@nhs.net

www.firststeps-surrey.nhs.uk

The Samaritans

08457 90 90 90 - 24 hour helpline

jo@samaritans.org

www.samaritans.org.uk

**If you require this booklet in a larger font or other
language please contact First Steps
0808 801 0325**