

Carers' Self Advocacy Toolkit

How to manage your stress



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As a carer, it is important that you look after your own emotional health and wellbeing as well as the person you care for. Stress is part of everyday life and for many carers, stress is a major factor in their lives. You may be juggling paid work with caring or you may have had to give up your paid job to care for a family member. You may have had to make big and unwelcome changes in your life as a result of illness and disability in the family – you may be feeling resentful and or guilty because of the changes – and these are all very stressful, and it's often the case that expectations carers have of themselves contribute to stress. Not all stress is negative as it can spur you on to achieve a task, but if the balance tips too far and your stress levels become very high, you may feel unable to cope. You can become more and more exhausted, tense and irritable and start to feel out of control.

Ways to Manage Your Stress

There are a number of steps you can take to help reduce stress and cope more effectively with caring.

- Ask for practical help
- Take time out
- Use techniques to manage your stress
- Find ways of relaxing
- Learn to say no
- Keep Active
- Eat well
- Get enough sleep
- Get emotional support

Ask for Practical Help!

If you are coping alone and feel you need some help in your caring role, your social work area team may be able to help, by assessing the needs of the person you are caring for with a **Care Needs Assessment**. This may identify services such as home care, home adaptations or community alarms, which will help ease the burden. Importantly, you can ask for your own **Carers**

Assessment that assesses *your* needs as a carer and this could identify services such as respite and referral to your local Carers Centre.

Taking Time Out

Take time for you every day - even if it's only a few minutes and remember that looking after yourself isn't selfish – it's sensible. If you need a longer break away from caring, there are a number of different respite services available in different kinds of settings, where the person being cared for stays for a few nights. Daytime respite may also be available through local sitting or befriending services. All respite services (except befriending services) are regulated by the Care Inspectorate and are checked to ensure they meet the required standards. For more information on respite, contact your local carers centre or Carers Scotland. Many carers feel very guilty about asking for respite but remember that you need a break so you can carry on providing a high level of care for the person you are looking after. If and when you get

respite from your caring role, make sure you do something you enjoy!

If you want to arrange respite, call your local social work number.

Find ways of Relaxing

You can find out more about relaxation techniques from your GP or if you have one, a healthy living centre. **Contact us for the Dealing with Anxiety Satellite.**

Learning to Say 'no'

As a carer looking after someone else, you have a right to ask for what you want, have opinions, to make your own decisions and to say no to other people for at least some of the time. To increase your assertiveness, it is important to decide what you want (or don't want) before you say so, to work out if this is fair to you and others, to ask for it clearly firmly and calmly. See the section of the Self-Advocacy Guide on assertiveness.

Being active

Building more physical activity into your daily life can help you keep healthy and give you more energy. You don't have to spend a long time exercising. Try taking a brisk walk each day – around the block, to the park or shops – it's free, accessible and helps build up stamina. If it's difficult to leave the person you are caring for alone, why not try an exercise or fitness video in your own home or, put on some music on and move about in the house?

Eating well

It is vitally important that you have enough to eat and that your diet is as balanced as possible. This will lower your own risk of illness and help provide you with the energy that you need in your caring role, which will help combat stress. Your diet should be made up primarily of vegetables and fruit and starchy food. Meat and other protein food make up a surprisingly small proportion of the plate. Whilst adults require the equivalent of 1 pint of milk a day, fatty and sugary food should be

limited (boo!). Also remember that we should be drinking between 6 and 8 cups of fluid a day, including tea and coffee (although caffeine drinks can be dehydrating).

Foods to Help Fight Stress

- eating porridge at breakfast time - to keep you going
- turkey at lunch or dinner - mood boosting
- oranges, Kiwi Fruit and strawberries - Vitamin C
- bananas for your blood pressure
- wholemeal bread to maintain energy
- white fish - prevent mood swings and helps you sleep
- water - to avoid dehydration
- brazil nuts or almonds/lean meat for selenium/magnesium to prevent lows
- prunes for antioxidants that can help your immune system
- tea to reduce stress and allowing you to take a break
- a 'Sleep Sandwich' which is according to the Sleep Council the ultimate sleep buttie, made using marmite, banana and lettuce...

Getting enough Sleep

It is common for the stress and the demands of caring to affect your sleeping patterns. Here are a few top tips for a sound sleep that may be useful for you.

- Develop a good pre-bed routine, do relaxing things and avoid stimulating activities in the hour before turning in
- Write down all your worries for 15 minutes in the evening, then put the list away and stop worrying!
- Try to go to bed at the same time and get up at the same time every day.
- Cut down on fluids after your evening meal (and that includes alcohol)
- Make sure your bedroom is a good temperature, around 18°C or 65°F.
- Avoid caffeine after 4pm (coffee, tea, chocolate and cola) Try a milky drink like

Ovaltine or Horlicks or decaffeinated hot drinks

- If you wake in the night, relax, switch on a soft light and read until your eyes feel tired or get up for 20 minutes, then go back
- Use an alarm clock to wake you up at a regular time, but turn the clock away from you – watching the minutes go by just causes unnecessary tension
- Try a 'sleep sandwich' (see Eating Well above)
- Contact your local carers centre for details of any relaxation classes going on in your area

Getting Emotional Support

Keep in contact with family and friends for social interaction and moral support.

Support Groups at your local carers centre can be good places to talk. If the caring situation becomes very difficult, you may prefer to talk to someone you don't know, who can help you make sense of difficult emotions and control your feelings, so you don't feel so lost. See the main guide for counselling contacts.

References

'Manage your Mind, A Mental Fitness Guide
Gillian Butler and Tony Hope OUP 2009.