

UNPAID CARING IN NORTHERN IRELAND

1. There are over 220,000 people providing unpaid care for sick or disabled family members or friends in Northern Ireland. ^[1] Many are caring around the clock and Northern Ireland's unpaid carer population is saving the health service £5.6 billion per year in care costs. ^[2]
2. Unpaid carers are a diverse population, encompassing child and young adult carers through to carers of pension age – and support people with health conditions like cancer, stroke, progressive neurological conditions and visual impairment; mental ill-health; learning disabilities; terminal illnesses, and more.

THE IMPACT OF UNPAID CARING ON MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

3. While caring can be rewarding, it can also be unpredictable and stressful. As a result of providing unpaid care, carers can face changes in their employment status, their financial situation and experience difficulties in maintaining social connections, hobbies, and interests – with a subsequent loss of their own identity.
4. This can all have a detrimental effect on a carer's own health and wellbeing. One in four carers in our State of Caring survey described their mental health as bad or very bad. Levels were worse amongst carers who had been caring for ten years or more (29%) and those carers who provided the most intense caring (50 hours or more per week) (30%).
5. Carers reported significant rates of anxiety and stress (84%), low mood (84%), irritability and mood swings (80%), an inability to switch off from worrying about caring (80%), feelings of hopelessness (72%), fear or dread (71%), and depression (49%).

"I don't want to get out of bed [in the morning] to face it all again. I'm constantly stressed." – unpaid carer

"I can't sleep. I'm always fearful and worried." – unpaid carer

6. For some, the pressure is enormous and 24% of carers indicated they had thoughts related to suicide or self-harm.

DRIVERS OF POOR MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING AMONG UNPAID CARERS

7. Due to the demands of caring, a lack of time and with their focus largely on the needs of the person they care for, carers often neglect their own mental health and wellbeing. Three out of four carers (76%) in our State of Caring survey had continued to provide care despite feeling they were at breaking point. Just over half (53%) said they were too busy caring to seek help for their own mental health.

"I'm worn out. I rarely get an unbroken night's sleep. I need counselling but I am unable to leave my daughter unattended." – unpaid carer

"My mental health has to take a back seat. I just don't have time to stop and think about it." – unpaid carer

¹ Census 2021.

² Centre for Care and Carers NI (2023). The economic value of unpaid care in Northern Ireland.

8. Carers can be reluctant to seek help due to difficulties accessing services such as GP appointments or over concerns about long waiting times. One in three carers (33%) said long waiting times were preventing them from seeking help with their mental health.
9. Breaks from caring can support carers improving physical, mental and emotional wellbeing and enhancing resilience. However, many carers have been unable to find suitable replacement care services and have been unable to take regular and meaningful breaks. Fewer than two thirds of carers (59%) had had a break from caring in the last 12 months.

"I have not had a full day off in the last 4 years." – unpaid carer

"I have never had a holiday and it doesn't look like I ever will." – unpaid carer

"I feel like a caged animal, especially during the winter months... Being housebound with him [the cared for person] is taking its toll on my mental health...[I've] just lost the will to live because of the pressures on me." – unpaid carer

10. For carers in paid employment, juggling the demands of a job with their caring role unsupported can lead to stress, exhaustion and burn out.

"You just have no time for yourself. My stress levels at times would be high and I find it hard to sleep at night, worrying about the next day, work, everything... You worry about everyone else and what they need first and unfortunately you're the last one to get any help and support." – unpaid carer

11. More than two thirds of carers (69%) in our State of Caring survey indicated that the increased cost of living is having a negative impact on their physical and mental health. Carers who reported struggling to make ends meet had higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depression and indicated that financial pressures had led them to cut back on hobbies and leisure activities and seeing friends and family.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

To begin reversing these trends and protect the mental health and wellbeing of unpaid carers in Northern Ireland, we are calling for:

- Delivery of the adult social care reform agenda set out in the Power to People report and subsequent consultation by the Department of Health, with a particular focus on expanding access to high quality community and replacement care services.
- Development of a cross-departmental Loneliness Strategy for Northern Ireland.
- Full funding of the Northern Ireland Mental Health Strategy 2021-31.
- A new legal right to breaks for unpaid carers.
- Greater workplace rights to support carers in employment, including paid carer's leave and flexible working options.
- Root-and-branch reform of the Carer's Allowance system, with delivery of the Carer's Allowance Recognition Payment as an interim measure to begin tackling carer poverty in Northern Ireland.