[Carers Week](https://www.carersweek.org/) is an annual campaign to raise awareness of caring, highlighting the challenges unpaid carers face and recognises the contribution they make to families and communities throughout the UK. It is estimated that 6.5 million people in the UK are carers, but [over half of carers take more than a year to recognise that they have taken on a caring role](https://www.carersuk.org/for-professionals/policy/policy-library/missing-out-research-briefing-on-the-state-of-caring-2019-survey), and miss out on important support as a result.

In the second monthly blog by St Mary’s Mental Health First Aiders, Matt James, Programme Director, MA Bioethics and Medical Law, shares his experience of being a Carer.

# Caring for the carers

"You also need to think about caring for yourself Matt". As she looked up from her notebook, the mental health nurse's comments were nothing but sincere and compassionate. But I remained surprised. I was attending the appointment with my wife who had recently been diagnosed with anxiety and depression. I was there to be a second pair of ears to remember key advice and generally be a source of moral support. Why might I need help and support? Was I showing signs of something only a professional could discern?

I quickly realised that I had another role aside from just husband. I was a carer. Like many others in a similar position it probably never occurred to me to see them as two distinct roles. They're all part of the same relationship surely? Indeed, they are but the role, responsibilities and duties (all rather technical terms I still feel uncomfortable with using when discussing in this context) are so important and vital in the care of others that they need to be recognised and supported. That morning I was fortunate enough to be offered a carer's assessment. Not to assess my ability to care (!) but to assess my needs and what support might be available to me should I wish to take it up.

It is staggering to think that there are 6.5 million people in the UK who are carers. Up and down the country they are looking after a family member or friend who has a disability, mental or physical illness. Often these people will offer this care because they would think of doing nothing else. Such humility is what makes their care so unique and valuable and yet it remains crucial that their own physical and mental health is kept in check so that it does not adversely suffer.

National Carers Week (8th - 14th June) gives a great opportunity to celebrate and raise awareness of the support carers offer and to champion the contribution they make to the lives of others.  In no way would I set myself up to be a Florence Nightingale of the caring world. Sometimes I do well and sometimes I make mistakes. Caring for someone you love who is going through significant mental health challenges can be extremely distressing and exhausting as well as immensely rewarding.

Those caring for loved ones living with mental health problems are often reminded to 'put your own oxygen mask on first' before helping others. Own self care is crucial because if we don't take care of ourselves before attempting to help others, then we put our own health and wellbeing in jeopardy.

So, what does self-care look like? I offer some suggestions below which I hope might be helpful to you and others who find themselves caring for others:

**[1] Make time for you.**

This can be a real problem for many carers as it seems so counter-intuitive to what we most want to do: devote time and attention to the care of others we love. However, stopping to think about this for just 30 seconds causes us to realise the flaw in this thinking.  We need time to ourselves to unwind, reset and be refreshed.

Without a break we can very easily become resentful of having to care, frustrated with the situation and the person we're concerned for and loose all sense of perspective.  It's obviously good to share common interests and hobbies with those you're caring for but it's also good to develop your own interests as a way of 'refilling your tank'.

**[2] Know your limits.**

Caring for others can make you feel you have to morph into the Superman or Superwoman of the caring profession.

“No issue too difficult, no hurdle too high. I am super carer and no one can care like I can!” Back in the real world, life is more challenging and frustrating. Getting clear in your own mind what you can take action on and be responsible for can help to lighten the load.

No one person can resolve someone else’s depression but taking the time to help the person to recognise something positive they have achieved during their day or encouraging them to help you with a task, could help to lift their mood. Freeing yourself from thinking that you're the only one who is able to care and support means you're also more likely to feel you can accept help from others.

**[3] Learn to listen more and talk less.**

Reading up on mental health issues and getting to grips with the latest advice can be really helpful and aid you in your care of others. However what I have learnt can be even more powerful is the ability to listen. Those of us involved in teaching and learning will be familiar with the question 'Are you the sage on the stage or the guide on the side?' when it comes to our teaching style. Similarly, in caring for others, the 'sage on the stage' approach where you're ready to give advice and offer your opinion on what they should be doing is not as helpful as being a 'guide on the side'. You care by listening as you walk through the situation with them.

Offering advice can be part of this but very often for someone living with mental health problems having someone who will listen to them - really listen to them without judgement or prejudice - can be the greatest help you can offer them.

**[4] Maintain a support network.**

It's important that you have trusted friends and family around you that can help offer you support. This could be a listening ear when you need to vent your frustrations or practical support when you need an extra pair of hands to help out in a particular situation. It seems so obvious in theory but in practice we can become so focused on caring we can forget how we draw strength and perspective from allowing others into our lives.

Getting in touch with one of the Mental Health First Aiders at St. Mary's could be one way of developing this network.  If you do need support please don't hesitate to ask for it.

**[5] Be patient.**

Mental health recovery takes time! The journey can be a real rollercoaster of emotions both for the person living with mental health problems as well as for those caring for them. But to keep on reminding yourself that it is a journey and things will change can be really helpful, however much current circumstances might seem to point to the contrary.

Ends

If you are a staff member who has caring responsibilities we encourage you to join St Mary’s Carers Network. The Carers network is a group open to any staff at St Mary's with caring responsibilities, including caring for a child, a partner or relative with ill health, or elderly parents for example. The Carers Network will be working closely with HR, looking at St Mary's flexible working policy. This is an opportunity to directly impact the wellbeing of carers at St Mary's; if you are interested in being a part of the group please email fiona.hnatow@stmarys.ac.uk.