



A Guide for Carers

Mental Health and Wellbeing in later life



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Caring for someone who is mentally unwell

What can affect mental health in later life?

Later life can bring significant changes. Many are positive, but some events can be very hard to cope with.

Common events in later life include:

Retiring and losing daily routine. Someone may have been looking forward to their retirement but find it hard to adjust to the loss of structure to their day, contact with work colleagues, and the sense of purpose provided by going to work every day.

Moving home to a smaller property, a care home or sheltered accommodation may affect social networks and could seem like leaving part of your life behind.

Losing contact with close friends or family if people move away or are unwell and find it hard to communicate.

Mourning the loss of someone close who has died.



Changes in physical health such as worsening arthritis, hearing and sight problems or having a heart attack or stroke. There can be a lot to cope with, from shock at a diagnosis, needing medication, changes to day-to-day routines and a loss of independence. There may also be symptoms to deal with such as tiredness, pain or discomfort.

Signs that someone is having a difficult time

Stressful events can affect anyone's behaviour and lead them to be angry, irritable or sad. These are all natural responses but are usually only temporary.

If someone has a mental health problem, their mood and behaviour may change quickly or over a number of months.

Common signs are:

- Changes in mood.
- Sleeping too much or too little.
- Preferring not to be around other people.
- Seeming less able to cope with their usual hobbies or interests.
- Difficulty with memory or concentration.
- Being preoccupied with odd beliefs.
- Finding it more difficult to look after themselves.
- Talking about suicide or self-harm.

Communicating with the person you care for

Communication can be a struggle for many people with a mental illness. However, if you are a carer you need to communicate with the person you care for to find out how they are feeling and how they want you to help them. They need to know that you want to listen.



Listen to what they have to say and let them express themselves without interrupting or offering your opinion. Do not sound like you are criticising them for being unwell.

Some people will not want to talk, and others may lack the confidence to say what they really want. People who have hallucinations may have problems communicating depending on what they believe is happening to them.

Getting Help

The best place to start is encouraging the person you care for to speak to their GP. This is best discussed when you are both relaxed and you have the time and privacy to talk.

Some people may not want to visit their GP - they may not think they are unwell, or they may think that feeling low is just part of getting older. They may believe that the doctor would not be able to help them or they may feel embarrassed or ashamed.

If you have suggested an appointment with the GP but the person you care for does not want to go, you could explain that you are worried about them and offer to go with them or to talk to their doctor before they go themselves. Try to ask them why they do not want to get help.

If the person you are supporting is feeling paranoid, they may believe that you and the GP are plotting against them. Get advice from your own GP if the person you care for feels like this.

It may help if you tell your own GP about your concerns. Your GP will be able to give you information about local services and support and will help you look after your own health too. Most doctors expect the person who is unwell to approach them directly. This can be difficult for a carer as you cannot force someone to speak to a doctor even if you think they are unwell. However, doctors should listen to your concerns. In some cases a GP will invite them for a check-up or try to arrange a home visit to see how they are.



No-one can be forced to accept treatment unless they are detained or 'sectioned' under the Mental Health Act. This would only happen if the health professionals assessed that the person was a risk to themselves or others and they were not able to accept help willingly.

Voluntary organisations

There may be voluntary organisations in your area which could provide support.

Some people are more comfortable getting help from a voluntary support service than from a GP. A voluntary service may feel more approachable and less clinical than a GP surgery. Although voluntary organisations can provide services such as talking therapies and group support, they cannot give medical help.

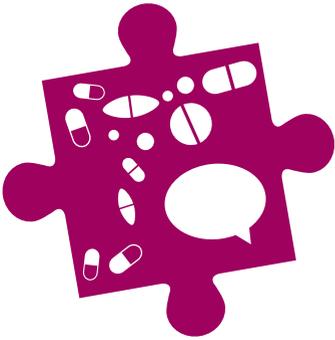
If the person you care for has a mental health crisis

A mental health crisis happens when someone's health worsens to the point where they need urgent medical help. A crisis may be:

- Thinking about suicide or hurting themselves.
- Having an episode of psychosis (where they might experience or believe things that others do not), or
- Behaving in a way that could put them or others at risk.

In an emergency, call 999. The emergency services will assess the best way to provide help. They may contact the local mental health crisis team. If someone needs physical treatment because they have self-harmed they are likely to refer them to Accident and Emergency who may then arrange for them to see a duty psychiatrist.

Call **NHS 24** on **111** if you need medical advice and help but it is not an emergency.



Treatments for mental health problems

When someone first becomes unwell, they will normally be treated by their GP. If the GP feels more specialist help is needed, they may make a referral to the local Mental Health Team. Most people who are supported by a Mental Health Team have their treatment at home or in the local community.





Medication

There are a number of different types of medication available which help people in different ways. A GP will explain which medication they believe is the best for someone, describe how it works and discuss possible side effects. If the medication turns out to have side effects which are difficult to handle, the patient should speak to their GP again to see if there are alternative treatments available.

It may take a few weeks before medication helps someone to feel better, so they may need support to keep taking it until it has time to work. It is then important to keep taking it for as long as the GP recommends; if someone stops taking the medication too soon (even if they feel better) they could feel worse again.

Detailed information about medication used to treat mental health problems is available from **NHS Inform** See their website **www.nhsinform.scot** or call them on **0800 22 44 88**.



Talking Therapies

For some people, talking therapies work well. Their GP can advise what is available locally and what may be of most benefit. There are several types of talking therapy:

Counselling gives people the chance to talk through everyday issues that may be causing problems and to develop strategies for resolving them.

Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy is based on the idea of becoming at peace with yourself. This focuses on helping people to focus on the present, rather than being bothered with negative thoughts about the past or the future.

Cognitive therapy (sometimes called cognitive behavioural therapy or CBT) looks at the way people think and how this may cause problems for them. It teaches skills to identify problematic patterns of thinking and behaviour and looks at how to change them.

Psychotherapy looks at how past experience may be affecting someone's life now, and may involve delving deeply into early experiences and key relationships.

Further information about talking therapies is available from **NHS Inform**.



Complementary and Alternative therapies

Some people like to use Complementary therapies such as acupuncture, aromatherapy, massage, meditation or yoga alongside or instead of treatment recommended by a doctor. Anyone thinking about a complementary therapy should discuss it with their GP first as it may affect their medication or other treatment.

It is important to check the qualifications of anyone offering a complementary therapy and to find out what the therapy will cost and how many sessions there will be. You also need to tell them about your current medication or treatment.



Professionals who can help you and the person you care for

A GP may be the first person someone talks to about how they are coping. If they have a good relationship with their doctor, they may find it helpful just to know there is someone they can talk to about their feelings in confidence. The GP may make a referral to a specialist service if they feel this will help. As a carer you can also discuss your own needs and concerns with the people who treat or support the person you care for.



Community Mental Health Teams

Community mental health teams provide help to people in their homes and their community, including counselling and other talking treatments, and claiming benefits. They may also be able to help in a crisis and provide support at home.

They are usually based at a hospital or a local community mental health centre. In some areas, people can refer themselves to the service but in other areas people need to be referred by a GP or local social work team. Some teams provide 24-hour services so that you can contact them in a crisis. The team will normally include:

Community mental health nurse or community psychiatric nurse (CPN)

They will work closely with the patient, their carer and family to plan appropriate care. Their training covers the whole range of mental health issues and they can help you to set goals and plan for the future.



Psychiatrist

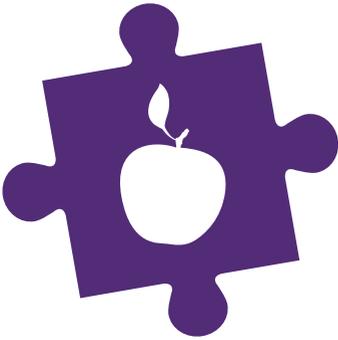
A psychiatrist is a doctor who specialises in mental health. They will ask about someone's background and any previous treatment, as well as the current situation. They will explain the results of their assessment and diagnosis and identify what tests or treatments might be needed.

Psychologist

Psychologists are trained to understand how people think, feel and behave. They have a good understanding of a range of psychological therapies. A psychologist will talk to someone about their feelings, thoughts and behaviour. The psychologist will help someone to understand the problems they are experiencing and work with them to identify ways they can deal with these problems to improve their health, wellbeing and quality of life.

Social worker

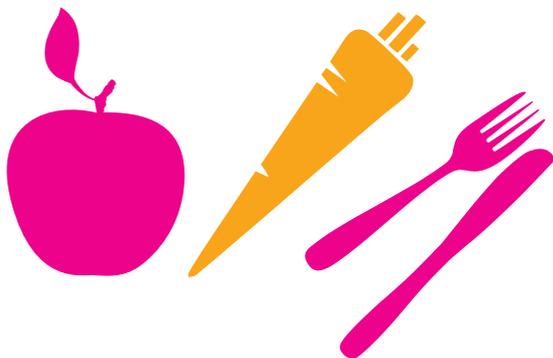
A social worker will assess the care and support needs of someone who "appears to be in need of community care services" and those of their carer. They will also work out whether you will need to pay towards the cost of your care. They can assess your needs as a carer even if the person you support does not wish to be assessed.



Looking after yourself

Being a carer can have a big impact on your life and on your own physical and mental health, so looking after yourself is important, for your own sake and so that you can provide care in the way you want to.

If you read this section and find you do not have time to look after yourself, call the **Age Scotland helpline** or your local Carer's centre to find out if there is support which could help to give you more time for yourself.





Eat Well

As a carer eating a balanced diet is essential to keep you healthy. For information about eating well and enjoying your food see the Age Scotland guide Eat Well.

Sit Less

Sitting for long periods of time can lead to poor health, whether you are watching TV, reading or providing emotional support to someone you care for.

Exercise

Exercise is important for physical and mental health. It helps people to deal with stress and to feel better emotionally. Physical activity is good for your heart, keeps you supple and reduces many health risks. Walking, swimming, housework, gardening and even walking up stairs can all make a difference.

Sleep

Looking after someone who is mentally unwell can leave you feeling particularly tired. If you are feeling anxious, this can make you tired too - you might have problems sleeping because you are worrying a lot.

If you are combining caring with other work and family responsibilities, you may not be getting enough sleep. Lack of sleep can make it harder to cope and make you feel worse. Some people find that relaxation exercises can help with sleep.



Be kind to yourself

Many carers will sometimes have negative feelings, so be easy on yourself if you do. It might be difficult to talk to the person you care for about how you are feeling yourself. Find someone you trust to talk to, this could be a friend or a carers support group.

Time off

Breaks or time off from caring are necessary but can be difficult to arrange. A break could be an hour every day, a couple of hours a week or a two-week holiday, everyone needs some time for themselves.

A break should give you time off from your caring role to let you do something that you want to do for yourself.

A break from caring does not have to mean being away from the person you look after, just a break from the responsibility of looking after the person's care needs.

Understand your situation

Finding out more about mental health problems and treatments may give you the knowledge to plan and cope better. It could help you know what to expect from treatment, how successful it might be and how long recovery might take.

Support from friends and family

Your friends and family may be a good support network. They might be able to provide practical support (driving you to appointments, collecting prescriptions, or doing some shopping or cleaning) or just be there to listen.



Spiritual support

You may find that your beliefs offer you comfort or support. Find spiritual support if this will help you from friends or family or your religious leader or a faith community.

Counselling

It is sometimes difficult to talk to people who are close to you; you may find it easier to talk to someone you do not know. Counsellors are trained to listen. They can help people to understand their feelings and find their own answers. There are different types of counselling for individuals, families and couples.

Your GP might be able to refer you to a counsellor or you can find a private one for yourself. **The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy** has information about counsellors in your area. Their website is www.bacp.co.uk

Support groups

There are many local support groups for people with mental health problems and for carers. These groups are often set up by local health professionals, or by people who have day to day experience of mental health problems or of being a carer. Meetings are usually informal and offer an opportunity to find out about other peoples' experiences and share your own.



Practical advice and help

You can call the **Age Scotland helpline** for help on **0800 12 44 222**. Alternatively, contact your local **Citizens Advice Bureau** or **Carers Centre** if you would prefer to speak to someone face to face. There is also information online at **www.citizensadvice.org.uk/scotland**.

Care needs assessment

If you, or the person you care for, think you may need support to live comfortably and safely at home, you should contact your council's social work department for a care needs assessment.

If you, or the person you care for, appear to be in need of community care services, the social work department has to assess your care needs. They will also work out whether they will need to pay towards the cost of their care. They can assess your needs as a carer even if the person you support does not wish to be assessed.

The assessment can also look at what help may be available for you to have a break from caring; ask your local carer's centre about this too.



Money worries

Balancing a household budget is hard at the best of times but having to be organised whilst looking after someone who is unwell is even more of a challenge.

If you are struggling with your budget and bills, or your budget has been stretched by the extra costs of caring, seek advice about how to get your budget on track and to deal with any bills which are worrying you.

Benefits

If you are caring for someone who is unwell for a period of time, you may be entitled to claim some benefits. Working out what benefits you or the person you care for are entitled to can be complicated, and many people do not claim everything they are entitled to. If you are unsure about benefits, get advice about your rights.

Legal Help

Having a mental health problem can sometimes lead to complicated legal issues. For example, someone may need help to claim the right benefits or to manage their money. If they need help to manage their affairs, or are sometimes not well enough to make decisions, get advice about your options.

Relationships

Relationships are important to mental wellbeing. If you are caring for someone who has a mental health problem this may affect your relationship if you change from your previous role to becoming a carer (or if you have two roles at once). If you want to talk about how to manage the change in your relationship contact your local Carers Centre.



Useful organisations

Age Scotland helpline: 0800 12 44 222

The Age Scotland helpline provides information, friendship and advice to older people, their relatives and carers.

If you need an interpreter call **0800 12 44 222** and simply state the language you need e.g. Polish or Urdu. Stay on the line for a few minutes and the Age Scotland helpline will do the rest.

You can call us for a copy of our publications list or download copies from our website at **www.agescotland.org.uk**.

NHS Inform

For more information about health topics

Helpline **0800 22 44 88**
www.nhsinform.co.uk

Action on Depression

Action on Depression is a support organisation for people in Scotland who are affected by depression.

www.actionondepression.org.uk

Scottish Association for Mental Health (SAMH)

SAMH is dedicated to mental health and well-being for all and has a vision of a society where people are able to live their lives fully regardless of present or past circumstances.

www.samh.org.uk



Support in Mind

Support in Mind Scotland supports people affected by mental illness, including family members, carers and supporters.

Tel **0131 662 4359**

www.supportinmindscotland.org.uk

Breathing Space

Breathing space operates a confidential phone line for anyone in Scotland feeling low, anxious or depressed.

Weekdays: Monday-Thursday 6pm to 2am

Weekend: Friday 6pm-Monday 6am

Tel **0800 83 85 87**

www.breathingspace.scot

LGBT Health and wellbeing

LGBT Age is a project run by LGBT Health and Wellbeing for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people aged 50 and over in Greater Glasgow, Edinburgh and the Lothians. The project aims to promote health and wellbeing and create social opportunities.

Helpline **0300 123 2523** (Tues and Wed 12-9pm)

www.lgbthealth.org.uk

Care Information Scotland

Care Information Scotland provides practical advice and information to carers on any care related matter

Helpline **0800 0113200**

www.careinfoscotland.scot



Carers Trust

The Carers Trust provides practical advice and support to carers and can find details of your local Carers Centre

Tel **0300 123 2008**

www.carers.org/scotland

Carers Scotland

As part of Carers UK, provides expert advice, information and support to carers

Helpline **0808 808 7777**

www.carersuk.org/scotland

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0333 323 2400
info@agescotland.org.uk
www.agescotland.org.uk

Age Scotland helpline
0800 12 44 222

Age Scotland Enterprises
0800 456 1137 (Edinburgh)
0800 500 3159 (Glasgow)



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