

Mental wellbeing

Looking after yourself

Your emotional health – and why it matters

Being in good health is about more than feeling well physically; it's also about being in a good frame of mind, feeling content and being in positive spirits.

'If you're struggling with the pressures that come with caring, this can have an adverse effect on your own health and it can also affect your ability to care for your loved one,' says Health Psychology Specialist, Clare Moloney.

'Being mentally and emotionally well is about being balanced in the way you think, making rational judgements and about being able to develop strategies to cope with day-to-day life.

'It's also about being able to lead a rewarding life and to find contentment, despite the challenges that come with caring.'

What is stress?

Stress occurs when pressures and challenges in everyday life aren't matched by the knowledge, ability or energy to cope with them.¹ Stress is common among caregivers, and can occur when the pressures of caring become too much.^{2,3}

As with other aspects of caring, different people have different ways of managing stressful situations and different thresholds for coping with it.

You might find yourself feeling stressed or more anxious when your routines change or when you're unable to make an adjustment to cope with changing circumstances.³ However, being able to manage changes as they occur is a good first step towards minimising stress and dealing with it as it arises.³

Some stressful situations may be temporary and occur suddenly – such as a toilet accident just as you were preparing to leave for an appointment – while other situations may occur over a longer timeframe and become more stressful as time passes, such as issues with difficult behaviour.³

Either way, to ensure you can continue to offer your loved one the best possible care, stress needs managing so that it doesn't have a 'knock-on' effect and lead to depression or illness.³

Feeling low

Everyone has bad days and feels down from time to time – being a caregiver in particular can be a heavy responsibility and affect the way you feel about yourself or about life in general.

However feeling down, sad, angry, frustrated or disinterested in life for prolonged periods of time may be signs of low mood or depression.⁴

If this sounds familiar, then speak with a member of your healthcare team or confide in a friend and ask for support and help.

As with stress, being aware of low mood and being able to identify its signs are keys to managing it.

How to monitor your mood

Monitoring your mood and being aware of how you're feeling each day is the first step to identifying where there's a problem – and then you can take steps to fix it. 'You can record your thoughts and feelings in a notebook or journal, writing down how you feel each day and listing some of the things that may have influenced how you felt.

'After a while you may start to pick up patterns and common feelings. You can discuss these with a member of your healthcare team and work together to help relieve some of the pressures that are causing them,' explains Clare.

For example, if you are regularly recording that you are exhausted, this could be a sign of burnout and a cue for you to slow down and work out a way of getting more help so you can rest and create relaxation time

Tips for managing stress

Here are some ways to help you manage the day-to-day stresses of caring:

- Caring is about meeting new challenges and developing solutions, but it's also about asking for help when you need it. Knowing when to ask for help can help offset stress before it occurs
- Remember that you can't control everything. Be realistic in what you can manage and try not to become anxious about the things you can't
- As with low mood (see example below), working out what is causing your stress can help you to address it, and also give you the inspiration and courage to take control of future challenges before they lead to stress
- 'Don't forget you can always take time out after a stressful situation,' says Clare. 'Taking five minutes to get some fresh air can clear your head and help you to think of other ways of looking at the same problem.'

Example: monitoring your mood diary

- Date
- How I felt
- What made me feel this way
- What I can do to manage this

23rd June

Today was a good day. I felt at ease and had lots of energy.

We went for a walk in the park with our daughter – it was great to see her. Mark also had a good day – no accidents or unexpected incidents, so that helped my mood!

I am going to start planning regular, simple outings like this that are good for Mark as well as for me.

24th June

I felt a bit down today after yesterday's 'high'. I also woke up very tired.

We had a rough night with Mark waking up several times. We also had an accident at breakfast with him spilling his bowl of porridge all over himself. I was exhausted by the time I got him to bed.

After a 'rough' night I plan to rest when Mark has his afternoon nap. Housework can wait while I get my energy back. I'm also going to start sitting with Mark while he eats. I'd rather spend time preventing accidents than mopping up after them.

References:

- 1 World Health Organisation, 'Stress at the Workplace' <http://www.who.int/occupational_health/topics/stressatwp/en/> [Accessed 17 August 2015].
- 2 Eurocarers, 'Carers in Europe', (Dublin: Eurocarers, 2009).
- 3 L. Transtrom Narum, N., 'Caregiver Stress & Coping: The Journey through Caregiving', ed. by North Dakota Family Caregiver Project (North Dakota State University, 2003).