

CARERS ARE WORTH THEIR WEIGHT IN GOLD

By Louise Deeley, Chartered Psychologist, Performance Coach and Wellbeing Consultant

Disclaimer – The author's views are entirely her own and may not reflect the views of Abbott.



We all know that is true, but when you think of the word *carer* what comes to mind?

Someone who looks after an elderly parent or relative? Maybe a friend giving emotional support? Or perhaps it's Mum or Dad caring for a child with Diabetes and all the intricacies that go with that? Whatever we think a carer is, the one thing that *is* true is that every person in a caring role is an individual with their own specific set of circumstances, their own ways of managing that role and their own emotional responses to the events that come their way.

Often the focus of attention is on the person they're supporting, and the carer, *AKA Parents, siblings, your next-door neighbour, the barman in your local ...* can sometimes get overlooked.

We all know that carers are not only essential to the person and families they support, but essential to wider society too, so we all have a part to play in supporting the mental and emotional well-being of these wonderful people, and the questions that come to mind are:

What can carers do to support their mental and emotional well-being and what can those that benefit from their care, directly *and* indirectly, do to assist this?

Mental wellbeing is about how you're feeling and how well you can cope with day-to-day life, and as we all know, this can change from moment to moment depending on how we're feeling emotionally so the two are inextricably linked.

When we've slept well, had a good meal and nothing's bothering us in our lives, then the way we deal with *what life throws at us* is often *very* different to when we're tired, hungry and worried about bills, relationships, and what's going on in our wider world.

Add in someone's personality preferences and dealing with stressful or unpredictable circumstances might be water off a duck's back for one person, and for another could be upsetting and have quite a serious impact on someone's mental wellbeing.

So, if you are a carer and things are getting a bit much, what can you do about it?

Firstly, cut yourself some slack. Despite what we sometimes think, no-one has to be a superhero – we just have to do our best with the resources we have at the time, and part of this is controlling the controllable, so here's three ideas that might help in times of increased stress:

1. Learn to breathe

This may seem odd but breathing 'well' can improve our relaxation response, reduce our heart rate and lower our blood pressure. A simple approach to start with is **equal breathing** - based on inhaling through the nose for a count of four and exhaling for a count of four. With time, this rhythm can be prolonged to counts of eight in, eight out. A good tip is aim for your stomach to expand rather than your chest. This way you move away from shallow chest breathing which is associated more with anxiety and more into belly breathing which is associated more with relaxation.

You can use equal breathing to prepare yourself for something you're worried about, or if you notice you're starting to feel overwhelmed and anxious, and you can use it in bed if you're struggling to drop off.

2. Look after your physical health

It is important to value our bodies. There is an old saying '*you can't offer water to drink if there's no water in your well to give*' (or something along those lines!) so pay attention to:



Sleep. Aim for 7 – 8 hours per night and take breaks throughout the day where you can. Sleep and recovery is so important, and has both long term effects on health as well as short term impacts, so where possible, get into bed early, avoid phones, tablets and laptops for at least one hour before bed and moderate the amount of alcohol you drink as these all affect the quality and amount of recovery you'll get.



Diet. Regular meals with plenty of fresh vegetables. Take fruit/nuts as snacks if you know your day is going to be busy, save reaching for sugary snacks that give you a temporary boost before you come crashing back down again.



Physical Activity. Aim to be active daily. Just 30 mins of brisk walking, built into our daily routine, on 5 days of the week, plus 2 days of strength exercises to work all your major muscles (legs, hips, back, stomach, chest, shoulders and arms) will help to keep you fit and well. With regular exercise you will sleep better and as such, this can help you feel less stressed and more positive about what you need to do.

3. Reach out to others

If you are having a difficult time, share your thoughts and feelings with someone you trust. It can be hard sometimes to make that first step, but once you do you'll notice how much easier it becomes over time, and the benefits of expressing and sharing what's bothering you can help you to let go of some of the emotions you're bottling up as well as help you see things in a different light. The feeling of being properly listened to helps everyone to know they're not alone, and if you think you would benefit from speaking with someone independent rather than someone you know, there's help and resources to be found at <https://www.mind.org.uk/>

A final note to add.

If *you* know someone who takes a caring role, whether it is for you personally or for someone else, take a bit of your time to find out how they are.

1. Say Thank You. Properly.

Yes, we do say thank you of course, but once in a while, it can be really effective to stop, and tell them how much you appreciate their support/what they do and *why* you appreciate them.

Being *properly* thanked can make the world of difference to someone, it doesn't take long and it costs nothing to do.

If you'd like more information about support for carers, there's a useful leaflet here that you can use or pass on to someone who may be interested.

<https://www.mind.org.uk/media-a/2903/supporting-someone-else-2017.pdf>