

# looking after yourself

Once you have realised that what you do for your relative or friend is more than what is expected in a normal relationship, it is probably time for you to start thinking about your own needs.

As carers we often say 'if the person I care for is receiving all the necessary services then I don't have any specific needs of my own.' However, it should be possible for you to be able to define your care giving within certain boundaries, so that you are working in partnership with those services. It is not unreasonable to expect that you should have time for yourself to engage in those activities, which you find life enhancing and help, maintain your well-being. (See section on carers' assessments).

Initially as carers we may find that the support and information we receive from a group or voluntary agency is all that we need or can cope with. As time goes on it is important that we maintain our social networks, families and friends, because caring can be a lonely and isolating experience. Often we feel inhibited about talking to people because of the stigma that is associated with mental illness. Somehow we need to break down these barriers or they will continue to persist.

Talking is a therapeutic exercise in itself and maybe we should start by talking to our G.P. who should not have a problem with stigma. By initiating this conversation we are also helping the doctor to recognise us as a carer (there should be a register of carers in the practice) and so alerting him/her to this causing extra stress, which may result in our own health suffering as a consequence. All too frequently carers ignore the warning signs indicating deterioration in their own health. We will be unable to continue caring if we become ill ourselves.

Like any other group of people, carers want to be able to work and have their own leisure time. All too often these things which most people take for granted are denied to them because of the burden of the caring role.

However, it is being increasingly recognised that unless these options remain open to them, carers will become less well able to cope with the demands placed upon them. There are services and agencies, which can help carers to stay in work or return to work. There is access through the carers' special grant to respite, either for short periods on a regular basis or for holidays. This has to be accessed through a carer's assessment (see section on carers' assessments). A carers' assessment and subsequent care plan should help to identify where the carer needs support for their own needs and where to access that support.

Opportunities for respite:

Forresters Respite Centre  
Southampton Road

Hythe  
Hampshire  
SO45 5GQ  
023 8084 3042