

The Mental Health Carers Handbook

a guide for families and friends
supporting someone with mental
health problems

Carers in Mind

Developed with the support of

South West London and St George's 
Mental Health NHS Trust

h o p e

Please note: When the handbook refers to 'families,' this is used in its very broadest sense and is intended to include anyone who is providing unpaid support for someone with mental health problems. You could be a relative, partner, friend or neighbour. When the handbook refers to 'your relative' this phrase is being used in the place of 'your relative, partner or friend,' purely to make it easier to read.

Whilst this handbook may be of use to anyone supporting someone with a mental health problem, it has been primarily developed for people supporting someone experiencing severe mental health problems.

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Richmond Borough Mind is a charity rooted in the local community and exists to meet local mental health needs. Our vision is of a society where people who experience mental health problems and their Carers are flourishing within their local communities.

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Introduction

If you are reading this handbook you are likely to have concerns about someone who has a mental health problem. You may be a relative, partner or friend who is providing support; you could be a parent, sibling, aunt, cousin or neighbour. It is important that anyone who is providing support to someone with mental health problems is recognised for their important role and offered information and support in their own right.

You are not alone, many people will encounter mental health problems in their lifetime – one in four people experience mental health problems. This handbook is designed to help you understand some of the approaches and skills that many people have found helpful when they are supporting someone with mental health problems.

Looking after yourself

Lu Duhig, Carer

Once you have realised that what you do for your relative, partner 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. If you are providing unpaid support you are a 'carer.' Recognising this can be an important step to take.

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 other services. It is not unreasonable to expect that you should have time for yourself to engage in activities which you find life enhancing and help to maintain your wellbeing.

Initially as carers we may find the support and information we receive from a group or voluntary agency is all we need or can cope with. As time goes on it is important 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 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 could start by talking to our GP 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 them 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.

Creating a 'toolbox'

Mental health professionals are trained in a whole variety of ways. Their training equips them with knowledge, skills and techniques that ensure they are able to do their jobs effectively. This handbook aims to help you create your own toolbox – a toolbox of knowledge, skills and techniques that you can add to, and develop over time.

You may find the self-help workbook created by Rethink Mental Illness and the Meriden Family Programme *Caring for Yourself* compliments this handbook as a practical tool for developing your skills and knowledge. We also recommend attending the family training programme delivered by Carers in Mind and

The South West London Recovery College.

Knowledge and skills can help you to support your relative more effectively. Knowledge and skills can also help you to protect your own wellbeing. The more you can learn, the better equipped you are likely to be in your role.

Acknowledgements

This handbook has been developed through collating and adapting materials and resources from a wide range of sources in the UK and from other countries. Whilst there are many advantages in the massive growth of information available on the Internet, this can also be quite confusing and difficult to navigate and the aim of this handbook has been to gather relevant resources into a single guide.

Three main elements have guided the development of my own practice for working with families and these elements have guided the development and compilation of this handbook. They are:

Family work

My first introduction to family work (a psychoeducational model for working with families) was through a workshop held by Dr Gráinne Fadden at The Royal College of Psychiatrists shortly after I started working with mental health carers. Dr Fadden has carried out extensive research, both in England and the rest of Europe, and has an international reputation for her expertise in family interventions. Dr Fadden is the Director of the Meriden Family Programme, which has developed a cascade method of training and systems of organisational change for improving services to families.

I have been extremely fortunate to be formally

trained in family work by Catherine Gamble, Mental Health Consultant Nurse for South West London and St George's Mental Health NHS Trust (SWLStG's). Catherine has trained me in the 'Kuipers, Leff and Lam model' of family work which she is implementing across SWLStG's. I am indebted to Catherine Gamble for her training, mentoring and continued support in developing my own skills and practice, as well as the work with families that we have developed collaboratively in Richmond.

Catherine Gamble's knowledge of, and clinical expertise in family work for psychosis has resulted in her being asked to disseminate the approach in this country and abroad. Catherine has published widely, was Royal College of Nursing's Mental Health Nurse of 2008 and is the first editor of *Working with Serious Mental Illness: a manual for clinical practice* (2006) Elsevier: London.

The recovery approach

My first introduction to the recovery approach was through SWLStG's booklet *Making it!* see page 47. I was then fortunate to be offered the SWLStG's Recovery training for mental health professionals led by Rachel Perkins.

Rachel Perkins' work has been an inspiration for many. Rachel has significantly influenced the development of mental health services at a local, national and international level. She influenced the guiding philosophy and vision of SWLStG's through pioneering the adoption of recovery-focused practice within the organisation.

SWLStG's has continued to break new ground in the development of recovery-focused practice, being the first mental health trust in the country to open a Recovery

College in 2010. Their commitment to working collaboratively with the voluntary sector has informed and enriched the work we have been able to develop for families in the borough of Richmond.

Family recovery

Whilst I encountered excellent training and resources for both family work and recovery in the UK, I found that the concept of 'family recovery' appeared to remain quite underdeveloped in this country. At this point, I turned to other countries which started working with recovery models in mental health services earlier than us in order to see what else might be available.

During my search I came across the excellent resources developed for families in British Columbia which fully embraced the concept of whole family recovery and recognised the specific challenges faced by families supporting someone with severe mental health problems that I had become so familiar with. This is the most advanced information and advice that I have seen to date, encompassing both the grieving process and looking at the difficulties of making the transition from caregiver to supporter.

Parts 1, 3, 4 and 5 of the handbook have large sections that have been adapted from *Family Self Care and Recovery from Mental Illness* (2008) and *How You Can Help. A Toolkit For Families* (2004, updated 2010). These were both produced by the Mood Disorders Association of British Columbia as part of BC Partners for Mental Health and BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information. I would like to thank them for the excellent resources they have developed to support family recovery.

Please note: *Skill: Making a positive request* on page 101, has been added to the communication skills section in Part 5 from *How You Can Help. A Toolkit for Families* in order to follow the communication skills from Falloon's 'Behavioural Family Therapy Model' delivered by the Meriden Family Programme which have been integral to my training.

Thank you

Firstly, we would like to say a very big thank you to the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames and The Richmond Clinical Commissioning Group who funded the production of this handbook for local carers, families and friends. Their continued support for the Carers in Mind project is very much appreciated.

I would also like to say a personal thank you to all of the professionals from SWLStG's and London Borough of Richmond upon Thames who have so generously educated me from my earliest days and for the continued support they have given to our work with local families. I would also like to thank everyone who read and commented on the first draft of this handbook.

Finally, and most importantly, I would like to thank all of our carers, families and friends who have taught me so much and whose strength and perseverance I am constantly amazed by.

Kim Willson, March 2013
Carers Project Coordinator,
Carers in Mind