

Self-care toolkit for unpaid carers



What is an unpaid carer?

An unpaid carer is someone who provides unpaid support to a family member or friend who may have a disability, illness, mental health condition, addiction or who requires general support in life. It may range from a few hours a week to something that's 24/7.

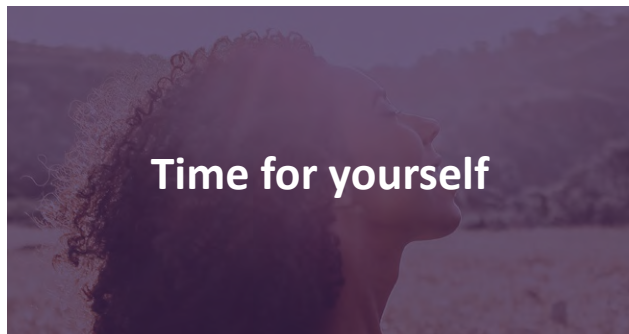
In 2020 **Carers UK** estimated that around 13.6 million people were caring for someone through the pandemic. Providing high levels of care can lead to poorer health, including feelings of loneliness and social isolation.



Self-care toolkit

Below are some key areas of focus to support your mental and physical wellbeing. Our own health can easily be put to one side when caring for others, so it's important your own mental and physical wellbeing is not neglected. Areas such as rest, sleep and physical exercise will help you to feel better and manage the additional pressures that come with a carer role.

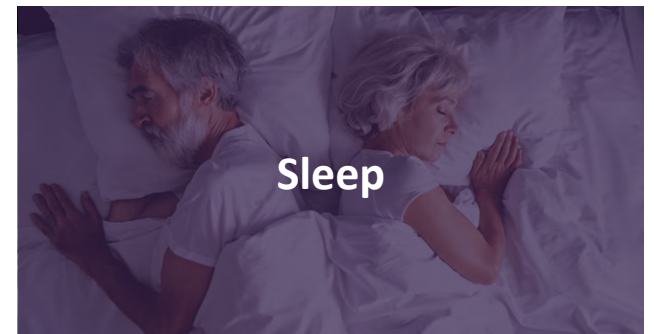
Click a topic below to explore tips and advice you can look to implement into your routine. Remember, small positive steps can make a big difference:



Time for yourself



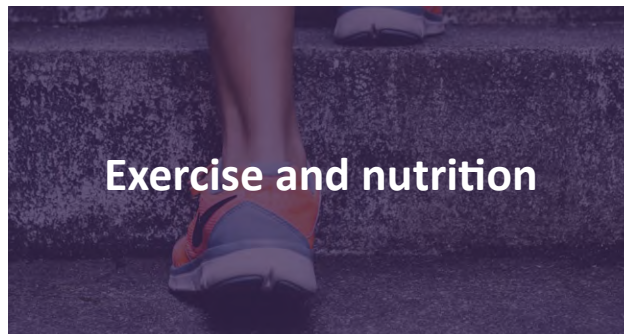
Mental wellbeing



Sleep



Social connection



Exercise and nutrition



Further support

Time for yourself

Making time for yourself can help to improve your mood, restore energy levels and boost your overall sense of wellbeing.



Rest and relaxation

Taking time to rest is vital for our body and mind. There are many benefits to relaxation, including stress reduction, muscle relaxation and a sense of feeling in control.

Try to plan time for yourself into your schedule. If you are struggling to fit it in, start with incorporating small pockets of time around some of your duties - even a 15 minute cuppa to yourself in the morning is a starting point.

Hobbies and interests

Look at how you can incorporate some of the activities you enjoy into your week. For example, Carers UK run free **online classes** on topics from yoga to singing.

Visit **Carers Trust** for further information about respite care and sitting or befriending services.



Mental wellbeing

Taking a proactive approach to our mental wellbeing can help to manage stressful situations and overwhelming moments. Below are some supportive measures you can try:

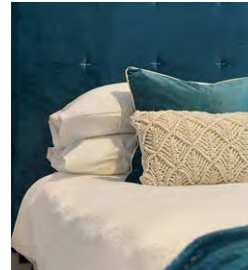
- **Mindfulness** - this practice is all about being more present in the 'here and now'. Practicing mindfulness can help to calm your body and mind. Carers UK have created a **video** which looks at how mindfulness can help carers.
- **Focus on the things you can control** - if a situation is starting to feel unbearable, try the **circles of control** exercise to help identify what actions you can take and what is out of your control.
- **Managing stress and worry** - The **NHS** provides a range of tools and techniques to help manage stress and worry, including a video on **how to cope with anxiety**. Mental health charities such as **Mind** and **Mental Health UK** also provide plenty of resources.
- **Spending time in nature** - whether it's going for a walk or doing some gardening, being outdoors is great for our mental health.

Sleep

Sleep is fundamental to our physical and mental health. There are many benefits to getting enough good quality sleep, including improved memory, stronger immunity, increased energy and reduced risk of ill health. Below are some tips to help improve the quality of your sleep:



Stick to a bedtime routine - try to go to sleep and wake up at a similar time each day. Start to wind down about an hour before bed, and try to avoid screens during that time.



Improve your environment - generally a room that is cool, dark and quiet is better for sleep. Ensure your bed is comfortable and consider what other things could help you to relax i.e. playing white noise.



Avoid caffeine after midday, and alcohol, nicotine or a large meal close to your bedtime - these can all disrupt your quality of sleep.



Diet and hydration - what we eat can affect our sleep, find out more in [this article](#). Keeping hydrated during the day is also key in allowing our body to rest.



Get active - physical activity during the day helps you to sleep better. Avoid vigorous exercise close to your bedtime though as this can affect your sleep.



Don't force it - if you're lying in bed awake and unable to fall asleep, try getting up and do something else for a bit until you feel sleepy again.

Write down your worries - if certain worries are keeping you awake, take some time before going to bed to write these down. This can help your mind to feel more at rest. Learn more about tackling your worries from [Every Mind Matters](#).

Social connection

As a carer, you may experience feelings of loneliness and isolation. To help combat these feelings, try to keep regular social contact with family members, friends or your local community. There are also plenty of online communities which allow you to connect with people in similar scenarios.



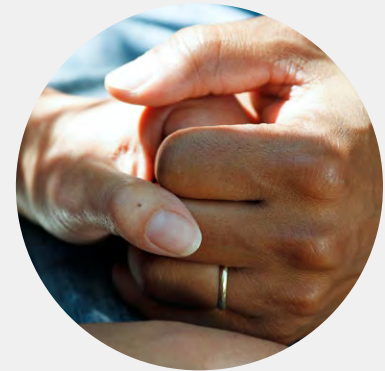
Share how you feel with others

Talking to others can help to relieve stress and process your own feelings. If you don't have someone close you trust, you can call the **Carers UK** helpline Monday to Friday, 9am – 6pm on 0808 808 7777.



Online communities for unpaid carers

If you prefer to connect with others online, why not try the Carers UK **online forum** or the **online community** for unpaid carers setup by Mobilise. Carers UK also run '**online cuppa**' sessions.



Hear others talk about their experiences

Listening to other people's experiences can be comforting to know that you are not alone. **Carer's Trust** and the charity **Mind** have both released videos capturing real-life stories from unpaid carers.

Exercise and nutrition

Exercise and nutrition impact our mental and physical wellbeing. Below are some tips to help you incorporate some best practice into your routine.



Exercise

Exercise provides many benefits for our body and mind. Time to yourself may be limited, but if you're able to incorporate bite-size sessions into your week it could make a real difference to how you feel.

- Exercise releases endorphins (our natural 'feel good' drug), and increases our self-esteem, motivation and energy levels. It also aids sleep and helps to reduce stress and anxiety levels.
- The NHS recommends at least 150 minutes of moderate intensity activity a week or 75 minutes of vigorous intensity activity a week.
- Find free exercise classes online in the **NHS Fitness Studio**, which cover aerobics, strength building and yoga exercises you can try at home.



Nutrition

What we eat has a direct link to our health. Poor nutrition can raise the risks of infection and disease, whereas a healthy diet reduces the risk of many physical and mental health conditions.

- Our nutritional needs can vary depending on our age. The **British Nutrition Foundation** provides guidance, including details about nutrition at different **life stages** - such as fertility, menopause and healthy aging.
- The NHS provide further guidance on how to eat a **healthy balanced diet**, which covers your 5 a day, different food types and digestive health.
- For more inspiration, take a look at a selection of **budget-friendly healthy recipes** the BBC have put together.

Further support

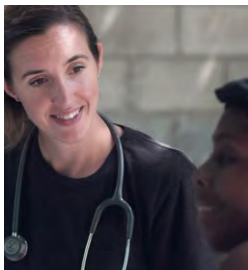
It's important to reach out for support, especially if you are struggling to cope. Below is a selection of charities and helplines, as well as other areas that may be able to offer further assistance.



A family member or friend - share your feelings with someone you trust. Talking through can help identify what actions you can take to improve your situation.



Your employer - check whether your employer has a policy or any services in place to help support you in your unpaid carer role.



Your GP - let your GP know about your responsibilities as an unpaid carer so they can signpost you to support. **Carers UK** provide more information about talking to your GP.

Helplines

Samaritans 116 123 - a 24/7 helpline with a team of volunteers available to listen. You can also email jo@samaritans.org if you would prefer to write your thoughts and feelings down.

Carers UK 0808 808 7777 - UK helpline open Monday to Friday, 9am – 6pm.

Online support

Carers UK

- Local groups and forums

Carers Trust

- When caring ends

Mind

Age UK

Health Unlocked (online community for carers)

Citizen's Advice