

MENTAL HEALTH MATTERS: Leaflet no 4 ***Caring for the carers***

Carers of people with functional illnesses [bi-polar and affective disorders, schizophrenia and psychotic illnesses, personality disorders etc] will experience years and decades of difficulty versus more settled circumstances: these types of illnesses are lifelong but can have periods where they are well-managed and able to allow better quality of life.

What resources are there?

'How to cope as a carer': leaflet by MIND at www.mind.org.uk/osb
Tel: 0844 448 4448

Carers Christian Fellowship: there are local groups and a newsletter link as support for Christians caring for a relative, friend or neighbour. E-mail : sjones.ccf@ntlworld.com

Carers in Herts: 01920 486677: groups who meet for support and campaigning for better resources [office hours]

Carers National Association helpline: 0345 573 369 [office hours]

Outside office hours: support and advice from Saneline: 0345 67 8000

If someone is offering a substantial amount of care over a long period, they qualify as a Carer with the Social Services, and can ask for an assessment to see what support can be offered. It is also a good idea to let their GP know that they are carers, as their own health can be at risk.

What is it like, caring for someone with a mental health problem?

Since 1 in 4 people at any one time are struggling with mental illness or distress, many of us are likely to experience it as carers [or sufferers, or both.]

The Experience:

'When it first happened, and my son became psychotic, I was desperate, not knowing where to turn'.

'We spent hours in A&E with our daughter, time after time, until she was finally diagnosed with mental illness.'

'My mother is driving me mad: she's forgetting everything, and I'm spending more and more time looking after her, when I have a house and family of my own and a demanding job'.

'I had a good GP and understanding work colleagues, and that saved me.'

'My mother has Alzheimer's, and I care for her round the clock. I get some time out of the house, but never enough.'

'Having someone in the family with serious mental illness is a long, dark road.'

When mental illness first strikes, confusion and anxiety may be high for the person's friends or relatives. Wrestling with an adult member of the family to prevent them hurting themselves, lying awake at night wondering what the noises downstairs mean, having responsibility but no power and feeling obliged to resort to persuasion, and duplicity to 'hold' the other- these are experiences which are exhausting and cause great distress. In cases of dementia, the distress is that of seeing someone loved and familiar, slowly slip

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away, to be replaced by a confused, often aggressive or helpless stranger. It is a long drawn-out bereavement.

What do carers need?

In the first stage of crisis, it can be very difficult to know where to get help, as it may take time for the sufferer to be diagnosed and be admitted to the mental health system. It is a frightening experience being with someone who is psychotic, especially if it is a member of one's own family, and some family members are better than others at dealing with it, as it needs a cool head and clear thinking. 'It can go on for weeks, not knowing what to do, and it's hard holding things together, especially if anxiety keeps you awake at night.' What many carers say they found, or would have found helpful, was a 'first stage listener'.

A First Stage Listener would be available until the first crisis is over. It would be someone with experience in the mental health field, either because they work in it as psychiatrist or nurse or therapist, or because they have been through the experience of crisis themselves, as carers, and know how heartbreaking and difficult it can be. This person would be able to put the experience in perspective for the carer, to help them talk with no preconditions, or to help them find their way around the mental health system.

In our diocese we are going to start offering First Stage Listeners; either mental health professionals or experienced carers, for those in crisis because of a family member or friend who has suddenly become mentally ill. If you would like to use this service or to recommend someone else, please contact:

For Beds: Barbara Ebeling, 01234 870363

For Herts: Verity Harvey, 01923 441023

Similarly, if you know someone who would be willing to offer their expertise in this way, please do let us know.

What can the churches do?

There are bound to be some carers in every congregation [and many vicarages] who may feel alone, frustrated, guilty, overworked or angry. Churches can offer practical help which will be much appreciated. Telling someone that the church is praying for them in the Sunday service may be welcome, but not as much as an offer to be with the person who is unwell, so that the carer can go to church themselves. Visiting is good too, but the carer may also be longing to get out to the shops, or have some time on their own. With those who have dementia or Alzheimer's, the needs of the carer are huge, and they desperately need some respite from caring, and some space for themselves, to let off steam, to just 'be', or to grieve. Carers can be consulted as to how they think the church might help them.

Prayer support can be a vital resource, and churches can provide this, perhaps in groups of two or three. Confidentiality would need to be respected, and it would be very helpful for the carer to have someone they could phone in a crisis. There are other means of spiritual support, such as special services, or anointing of the unwell person [or carer for their own needs], which secular support groups do not offer.

Small groups where carers can meet others in the same position are a great source of support, as people need a place to explore their feelings, to get their concerns into perspective, and to feel understood. Parents of ill children may feel guilt about their parenting and wonder if they are to blame: children of parents ill or with dementia may feel guilty because they get irritated with them.

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