

Caring for yourself.

Self-help for families and friends supporting people with mental health problems.



Caring for Yourself contents

Caring for Yourself is a self-help workbook for family and friends supporting people with mental health problems.

It is in eight parts. Each covers a different topic:

Booklet 1 Introduction

Booklet 2 Being a carer

Booklet 3 Information

Booklet 4 Communication skills

Booklet 5 Problem solving and goal achievement

Booklet 6 Relapse management and staying well

Booklet 7 Recovery and hope

Booklet 8 Taking care of yourself

Quick guide icons

Throughout *Caring for Yourself*, you will see these picture icons to illustrate different sections.



**Question /
To think about**



**Stories /
case studies**



Exercise



**Action /
things to do**



**Information
and resources**

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Introduction to Caring for Yourself

Rethink Mental Illness and the Meriden Family Programme have created *Caring for Yourself* to help people with mental health problems and carers, family and friends. It is for you if you support someone with any mental health condition. You may have a relative struggling with anxiety, depression or bipolar disorder, a friend with psychosis, schizophrenia or a personality disorder. Whatever the diagnosis, *Caring for Yourself* can help you to develop skills and new ways to cope.

You can use *Caring for Yourself* in two ways:

- Use it yourself independently.
- Use it as part of other training programmes for carers such as the Rethink Mental Illness 'Caring and Coping Programme' or the Meriden Family Programme's 'Caring for Carers' training.

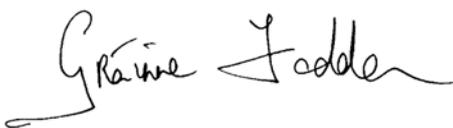
Whichever way is best for you, you can work through it at your own pace, in your own time. Start with Booklet 1, then plan how to use the other booklets and in which order you want to use them.

Everything in *Caring for Yourself* comes from the experiences of others who have cared for people with mental illness or from professionals. There are exercises and activities to help you develop skills to help you cope with your situation, whatever that is.

You will find information about:

- Being in a caring role.
- Taking care of yourself.
- Getting your own life back.
- Finding information about what your relative or friend is going through.
- Dealing with problems.
- Talking about what is going on.
- Supporting your relative or friend.

We hope the exercises and activities will help people who cannot attend training courses or support groups. If it helps you, please get in touch. We want to know how we can help more people who are supporting a relative or friend with a mental health problem.



Gráinne Fadden
Director
Meriden Family Programme



Paul Jenkins
Chief Executive
Rethink Mental Illness

Booklet 8: taking care of yourself

Caring for someone who is experiencing mental health problems can be exhausting. If you have looked at Booklet 2 of this workbook you will have spent some time thinking about the impact that the caring role has had on you. Even if you didn't, it's likely that you are well aware of the emotional and physical demands such a role has. It can be difficult, when in this situation, to think about prioritising your own needs.

After all, the focus that you, and others around you, have had is supporting your friend or relative in managing their problems. However, it is vital, in the long run, to consider your own needs too. It's not selfish to do this, but important in maintaining your physical and emotional well-being. It may also help sustain you in your caring role.

This booklet looks at understanding stress, before helping you identify ways that you can manage it. A positive approach to managing stress is outlined, with some suggestions on how to manage your mood, thoughts, activities and the physical symptoms of stress. There are some ideas on how you might adjust your own "self-care plan" so that, even when a crisis happens, you can do something to meet your own needs. Finally, this booklet closes with some thoughts about how to start setting goals and achieving them.

8.1 Stress



This next part describes stress, how it happens and the common symptoms that people experience when they are stressed. Before reading on, if it is comfortable for you to do so, think about a time when you were really stressed. It may have been a particularly difficult life event such as a divorce, bereavement or house move. Or it may have been linked to your friend or relative, such as not hearing from them for a few days, realising that they were becoming unwell again or having to go into hospital.

What were you thinking?

What were you feeling?

How did you feel physically?

It may be that you can remember the thoughts that were flying about in your head, as well as the feelings of worry that you experienced at the time. Or perhaps you felt tense in your body. It is possible that you have experienced some tension just remembering that time right now. What happened at that time, and what may be happening now, is that you have responded to a **trigger** or **threat**. This has set off a chain of events in your body that will help you get ready to deal with that threat. This response is called the **fight-flight response**. Understanding what this is and how it affects you, given that you may have experienced stress over the past months or years is an important first step in managing this stress.

The fight-flight response

When any animal, including humans, perceives a threat, a series of events happen to get the body ready to either fight or run away. These events start with brain cells firing and the release of hormones, like adrenalin. What follows are other changes in the body, such as a tension in the muscles and an increase in breathing so more oxygen can get to the muscles (getting ready to fight or flee). This response can be very helpful and all animals need this to survive. For example, a mouse needs to run away from a cat. And if there were a fire in our home or a car's brakes failed and it was coming towards us, we'd need to get away as soon as possible.

However, many of the threats people face these days, including ones that relate to caring for someone, aren't ones they can easily fight or run away from. For example, it is difficult to physically fight a computer that keeps crashing, or a tyre that has a puncture (although you might feel like doing so!). Similarly there may be times when it might feel preferable to run away from something frightening, whether it's an exam or something related to your role as a carer, but it isn't possible to do so. Nevertheless the stress response will be going on.

Life is challenging at times and so people are continually exposed to triggers, leading to the stress response going off time after time. Our bodies are built to be able to react in this way, and the response in itself is not harmful to us. In the short term, the symptoms are unpleasant and, once gone, can leave you feeling exhausted. In the longer term,

continual stress can have an impact on your physical and emotional well being. For example, stress can affect the immune system, meaning that it is easy to catch colds and flu and fighting infections is harder. Long-term stress and the associated increase in blood pressure are also linked to heart disease and stroke. Stress may also contribute to insomnia and migraines as well as mental health issues such as anxiety and depression.

The positive thing is that we can learn to manage stress so that we are less likely to react in this way when faced with a challenging situation.

What triggers your stress?

Knowing what triggers your stress is the first step in managing it. You might like to list down the things that come to mind when you think of the following two questions:

What stresses you out about life in general?

What do you find stressful in your caring role?

You may have found that the things that stress you out in everyday life are also the things that are difficult in your caring role. For example, living with uncertainty, whether it is about your job or your friend or relative's mental health, can be very stressful. On the other hand, there may be very particular things about your caring role that you find especially stressful. Either way, these triggers may be difficult to avoid. However, knowing what they are can help manage the source of stress, as well as the effects of it.

Some ways of managing the triggers might be:

- Use a problem-solving approach (see Booklet 5).
- Plan ahead for a stressful time e.g. Christmas, holidays, a busy time at work.
- Develop a relapse plan with your friend or relative (see Booklet 6).
- Make up your own "emergency stress management plan" (later in this section)

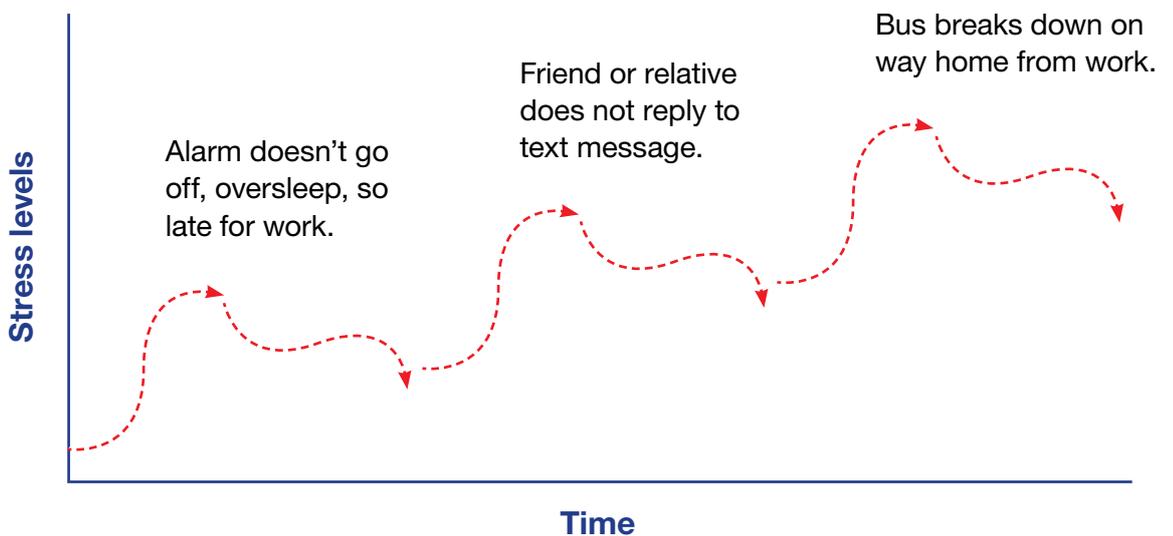
The snowballing nature of stress

Stress can have a way of creeping up on us. Often it's very easy to notice when you have got stressed over a particular event. Sometimes your stress levels go back to normal once the event has passed and the next time a similar event happens, you may feel less stressed about it because you know you can deal with it. However, it is also possible that, while you're not as highly stressed as you were, you haven't gone back to feeling as relaxed as you were beforehand. What can happen is that, over time, our stress levels creep up.



Signs of stress

It may be that you are well aware of when you are stressed. However, stress can be a bit like the noise of a radio. If it goes up gradually, you get used to it and don't notice it's bothering you until it stops.



You can see from the above example that although stress levels were low at the start of the day, by the time the bus broke down, levels were much higher. If you have experienced stress over a period of time, it may be that you have got used to that feeling, and so it might be a bit more difficult to notice when your stress levels are going up. Noticing how you are feeling can be an important step to reducing the amount of stress you are experiencing. Everyone experiences stress individually, and can do so in a number of ways – physically, emotionally, the way they think or in what they do.



Kate

Kate usually ate well, occasionally treating herself to cakes and chocolate. However, after everyone in her department was told their jobs were at risk, she worried that she might be made redundant. This uncertainty lasted for several months, at the end of which she noticed that every day she had got into the habit of eating at least two bars of chocolate and drinking several glasses of wine every evening.



Rashid

Rashid noticed that when his wife, Nadia, began to show signs of becoming depressed he began to feel sore and tight in his shoulders. He found it difficult to get to sleep and in the morning, his jaw ached from grinding his teeth at night. Finally, he became aware that it was difficult to tolerate waiting in queues, and he would get more irritable and short-tempered when he ended up in a queue at the bank or in traffic.

How do you react when stressed?

Take a look at the following lists and tick which applies to you. Add in any that you have noticed that aren't on the list

Signs of stress:

Physical

- Headaches
- Tension in neck and shoulders
- Tension in arms and fists
- Tight jaw/grinding teeth
- Raised heart rate
- Increased breathing
- Changes in appetite
- Constipation/diarrhoea
- Tension/pain in lower back
- Difficulty sleeping or sleeping a lot
- Others:

Emotional

- Irritable
- Frightened
- Worried/anxious
- Angry
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Fear
- Shame
- Guilt
- Others:

Cognitive (thinking)

- Worrying about things that have happened in the past or that might happen in the future
- Lots of thoughts racing through your mind
- Problems concentrating
- Memory lapses/problems/forgetting things
- Difficulty making decisions
- Unable to think clearly
- Others:

Behavioural

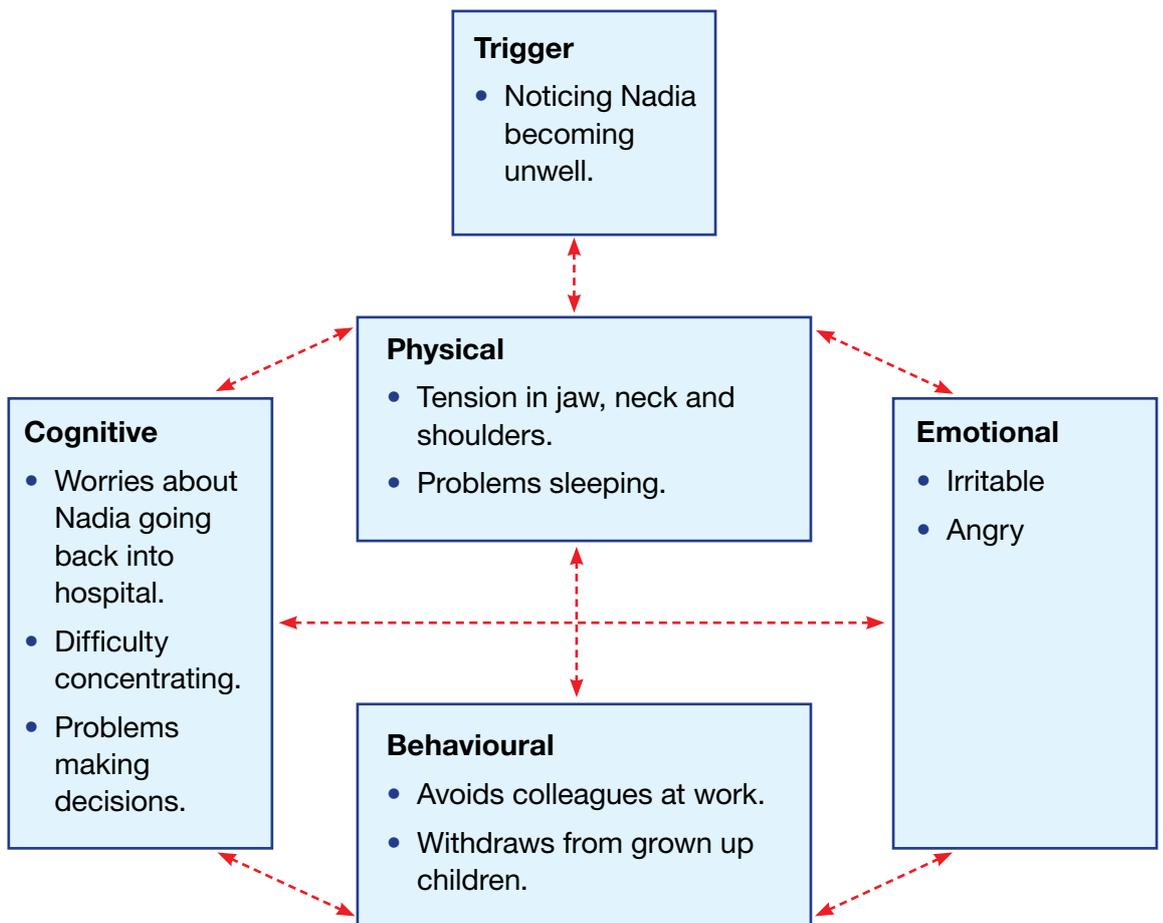
- Avoiding others
- Eating more or comfort eating
- Using alcohol or other substances to relax
- Snapping at others
- Becoming more accident prone
- Biting nails
- Smoking more
- Becoming unsociable/withdrawing from others
- Blaming others
- Rushing from one job to another
- Moving from one task to another without finishing the first
- Others:

Stress as a vicious cycle

The problem with stress is that once you begin to feel stressed, it can be very difficult to stop, because the things that you do, think and feel can often make you feel even more stressed. The following diagram, describing Rashid's stress shows how this can happen.



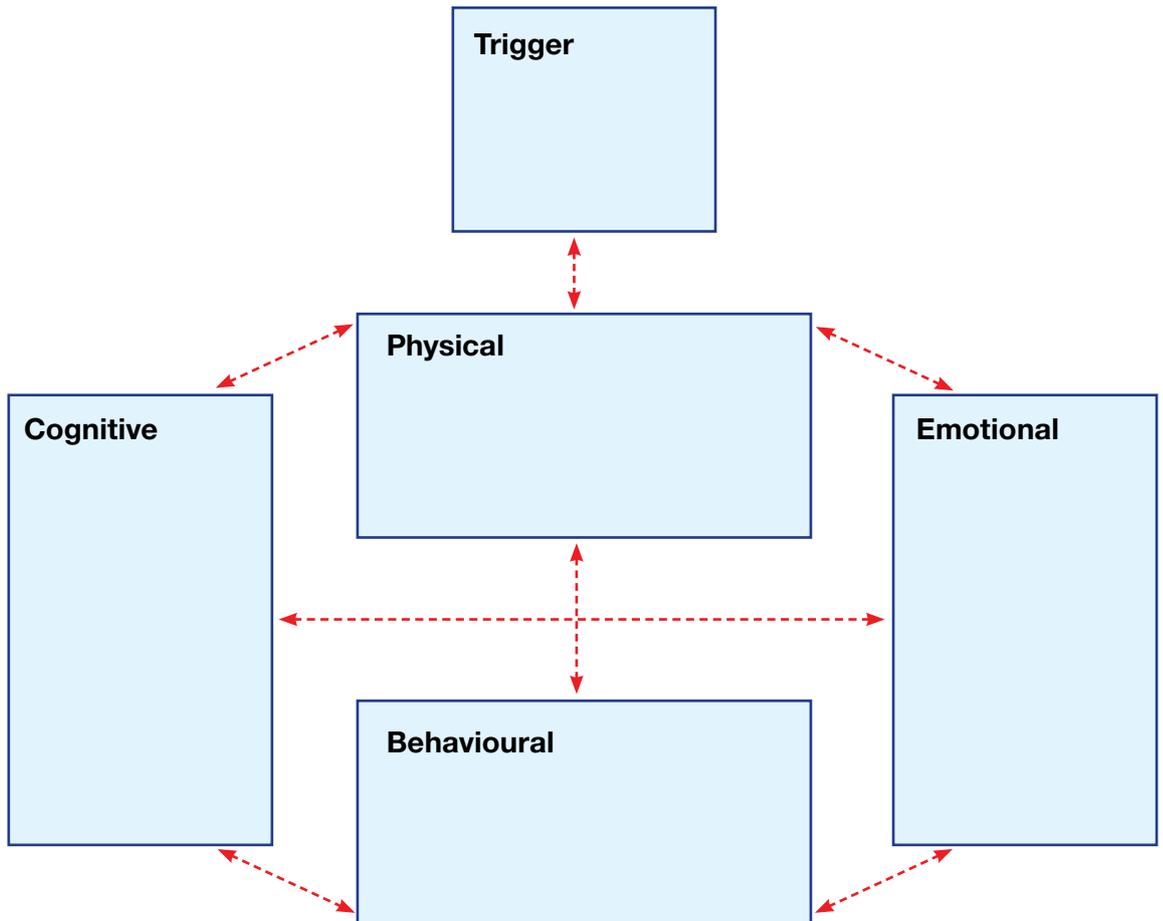
Rashid's stress cycle



As you can see, Rashid found it more difficult to sleep when he noticed his wife was becoming unwell. This, and the pain he felt as a result of the tension in his neck and shoulders, made him even more irritable, and meant that he started to avoid talking with colleagues and his children. However, this meant that he began to feel alone with his problems, which made him feel even more stressed and irritable, and so increased the tension he was feeling. The physical and emotional feelings Rashid was experiencing meant that he started to find it difficult to concentrate, making small mistakes at work, which in turn meant that he began to feel even more stressed and irritable, which made the physical symptoms of stress worse. Rashid was so tired from lack of sleep that he didn't have enough energy to spend time with family and colleagues. This meant that he had no opportunity to relax and distract himself by enjoying the company of others, so the physical and cognitive symptoms of stress worsened.

Your stress cycle

Take another look at your 'Signs of Stress' list. Can you see how each of the symptoms you experience may make it more likely that you continue to feel stressed? Just as Rashid was able to note what happens when he becomes stressed, you can do the same using the boxes below.



Looking at stress in this way can be quite stressful in itself. It may feel like you have enough to deal with, without having to manage your own stress. The good news is that becoming aware of your individual signs of stress will point you to where you can make some small changes, over time and reduce the amount of stress you are experiencing. While making even a small change may feel difficult, in the longer term, it will make it easier to face the demands and challenges of everyday life and your caring role.

Time for a break! You have made the first positive step in terms of identifying how you react when stressed. Maybe you might like to have a break before the next stage?

8.2 Managing stress

Just as people experience stress in different ways, the answers to their stress are likely to be very individual, so it's difficult to tell you *exactly* what you should do for your stress. However, knowing where you experience your stress most will point to what might be helpful for you at the start. The following pages describe some strategies that may be helpful in managing symptoms of stress.

Physical strategies

Working at changing *how* you feel physically can have a positive impact not only on how you feel, but also what you are thinking and doing. It can also change your mood. Three approaches to managing physical symptoms of stress are:

- To learn the relaxation response.
- To exercise regularly.
- Ensure regular sleep/rest

These aren't for everyone, but they are known to help with stress.



The relaxation response

Think about a time when you felt physically very relaxed. It might be when you were on holiday somewhere warm and sunny, with friends or family, or when you were alone, enjoying some peace and quiet. Perhaps you'd had a bath, or a massage, or had enjoyed listening to some quiet music or watched a happy movie with a friend.

What did it feel like, in your body?

When you are very frightened or angry, thinking or doing something different may be the last thing you feel able to do. Changing how you feel physically when experiencing acute levels of stress may feel impossible but it can be done and is one of the quickest ways of feeling better. One way of doing this is to learn a relaxation response, which is the very opposite of the fight-flight response – your muscles will feel relaxed and your breathing and heart rate will be slow.

How to relax your body

On the next page is a brief relaxation script. It is best to use it either lying down or while sitting on a chair with a high back so you can rest your head. Before starting, rate your level of stress, on a scale of one to ten, with ten being the most stressed you have ever felt. Read through the instructions and, as best you can, remember them and focus on letting the tension go from your body:



1. **Shrug your shoulders back, then let them drop down, focusing on releasing any tension you notice in your neck and shoulders.**
2. **Put your arms away from your body so they fall away at a 45 degree angle.**
3. **Open your hands, and imagine any tension flowing down your arms and out through your fingertips.**
4. **Focus on your body and allow it to sink into the chair or bed.**
5. **Let your legs fall away so they are at a 45 degree angle from your body.**
6. **Imagine any tension flowing down your legs and out through your toes.**
7. **Let your head drop back onto the pillow or the back of your chair.**
8. **Notice any tension in your forehead, eyes or jaw. Focus on letting that tension go.**
9. **Now bring your attention to your breath. As best you can, breathe in, slowly, through your nose.**
10. **For the next three breaths, breathe out through your mouth, and as you do so, imagine you are breathing out all the stress and tension you hold in your body.**
11. **Return to breathing normally.**
12. **Go over these points again, focusing on your head, shoulders, arms, body, legs and feet.**
13. **Imagine relaxation flowing down from your head, all the way down your body, to your toes.**
14. **You may want to spend some time imagining a pleasant, peaceful place, or remember one that you have been to.**
15. **When you're ready, wiggle your hand and toes and open your eyes. Stretch.**
16. **Rate your level of stress, on a scale of one to 10. What do you notice?**

You may have already noticed that you feel less stressed than when you started. If so, great! Keep up the good work. Perhaps you haven't felt any effect and it will take some time for this to happen. After all, you may have been stressed for some time and it can take a while for this to change. Furthermore, reading a script is very different to having someone talk it through. It can be more helpful to have someone read this or any other relaxation script out loud. In the 'Resource' section at the end of this booklet, you can find downloads of relaxation scripts, or you may find some on CDs at your library. Whichever relaxation method suits you, it's important to remember that you need as much practise doing the relaxation response as you have had with the fight-flight response. For this reason it might be helpful to bear in mind relaxation takes:

- Practice
- Perseverance
- Patience

Some ways of making sure you are likely to practise on a regular basis are:

- As best you can, ensure you won't be disturbed.
- Make sure you're comfortable (not too hot or cold, full or hungry).
- Do it at the same time of day, in the same place, every day of the week

Exercise

There are two types of exercise that may be helpful in managing your stress – energetic exercise and quieter activities. Doing something energetic, like going for a brisk walk might help you let off some steam. Regular exercise like this has been found to be very helpful in managing stress and depression. Think about a time when you may have had more time or energy.

What kinds of energetic exercise have you enjoyed in the past?

It may be that you enjoyed doing something with other people, like playing cricket, bowls or football or going for a run with a friend. Or perhaps you enjoyed going for a swim or a walk.

What is possible now?

If you're feeling "tired and wired" then the last thing you might feel like doing is something really energetic and you might prefer a quieter approach to exercising your body. These approaches have the benefits of strengthening and/or stretching your muscles, whilst asking you to focus on what is going on, which has the effect of quietening your mind. Consider exploring one of the following:

- Pilates
- Yoga
- Tai Chi
- Going for a gentle walk

Sleep

One of the first things to go when you are stressed may be your sleep. You may find it difficult to get to sleep or find that you get off easily enough, but then wake early, and then find it difficult to get back to sleep. It only takes a few disturbed nights' sleep to feel pretty rotten, leading to your physical resources being lower, so increasing your sense of being overwhelmed. There are a number of things that can be helpful in managing sleep problems and they are:

At bedtime:

Develop a routine that will get your body and mind ready for sleep:

- Do some relaxation earlier in the evening.
- As best you can, maintain the same bed time and waking time. This may be difficult, particularly in a crisis, but getting used to a routine will be helpful.





- Spend some time winding down before going to bed. Switch off the TV, avoid watching really stimulating things like horror films, the news or action movies.
- Set a time where you stop using the computer or other gadgets with screens, as they use light that will stimulate your brain. Leave at least an hour between using the computer and going to bed.
- Listen to something relaxing – the radio, music, a talking book.
- Avoid watching TV or taking work into the bedroom as you will end up associating bed with work. Keep the bed for sleep and sex.
- Ensure the room is cool, but you will be warm under the bedclothes.
- Take a warm bath.
- Have a light snack and/or a warm, decaffeinated drink.

During the day:

- Even if you feel tired, try to get some exercise, as this will help you sleep later.
- Avoid tea, coffee, coke and other caffeinated drinks or substances that stimulate your nervous system.
- Avoid alcohol – although it may make you feel sleepy, the quality of the sleep you get will be poor.

If you can't sleep:

- Try to avoid clock watching.
- As best you can allow yourself to relax. Tell yourself that even if you're not asleep, you're resting.
- Try relaxation or visualisation as a way of relaxing your body and distracting your mind.
- If you are still awake after 15-20 minutes, get up, maybe make a warm drink and do a gentle, non-stimulating activity. This could be reading something, listening to a talking book, radio or music or a gentle chore like folding laundry.
- Go back to bed when you feel sleepy.

Taking action: doing something different

Exercising, whichever way you do it, and ensuring you get as much sleep as you can are important behaviours that will help with your stress levels. However, finding activities that give you a sense of pleasure, as well as a sense of control and achievement will help your mood and improve your physical well-being. These activities needn't be very expensive or time consuming: in fact the cheaper and quicker the better! It is helpful to identify "everyday" luxuries that go some way to increasing your sense of well-being.



Fatima

Fatima remembered the pleasure and sense of achievement she felt in making her favourite meal, just the way her mother did before her.

Dougie

Dougie found joy in looking through old holiday photos and listening to the reggae music he used to play as a DJ when he was younger.

Janice

Janice made the most of a half hour watching her favourite soap, by curling up under her favourite blanket with a hot drink in her favourite mug.



What gives you a sense of pleasure or joy? List as many as you can, small as well as big.

What gives you a sense of achievement or a feeling of having done a job well?

If you have more time, energy and resources then doing something that is completely different from your work and caring role will help you “switch off” completely. It might be learning something new, in an evening class, regaining some of your favourite hobbies or activities or trying a new one.



Time for a break! You might like to take a rest at this point. Thinking about all of this can be quite tiring.

Managing difficult thoughts

It may be that when you are very stressed you find it difficult to concentrate or your memory goes. Or perhaps stress shows itself in your mind buzzing, whirring with a hundred and one worries. Managing your physical state will settle your mind, and doing things differently may temporarily distract you. However, it may be that you would like to tackle some of the thoughts you are having.

If you are having problems concentrating, making decisions or remembering things it may be helpful to consider what has helped in the past.

Bear in mind the following:

- Take small steps. Read one paragraph at a time. Break down decisions or tasks into smaller tasks.
- Consider when your best time of day is: is it in the morning, when you are fresh, or later in the day when you've had time to come to? If possible, do the most taxing tasks at that time of day.
- Make lists of things that need doing.

It may be that stress affects your mind in a different way. You may find that you are taken up with worries or thoughts that just seem to keep it going.

How to deal with the most common unhelpful thoughts



What are the things you say to yourself when you are very stressed?

“I’m not coping”

One of the most common thoughts people have when they are stressed or overwhelmed is “I’m not coping”.



If a good friend or relative was going through a similar experience what encouraging or comforting things would you say to them?

What would they say to you if they knew you were feeling this way?

Are there times when you haven’t thought “I’m not coping”?

What other ways are there of seeing this?

Feeling like you’re failing is understandable. Life has thrown so many challenges at you, you may be feeling overwhelmed. It may be helpful to bear in mind that this is exactly the point! Life is so demanding that it is outstripping the resources you have available. It doesn’t mean you’re failing. It doesn’t mean you’re not coping. It means that a lot has happened, and you may be sad, angry, stressed or overwhelmed. What answers to the above questions did you come up with? If you didn’t, does one of the following fit for you?



I’m going through a challenging time, but I’m coping.

I’m doing well, difficult though this is.

I’ve been through times like this before and got through them.

Things will change I can get through this.

I can endure, one step at a time, one hour/day at a time.

“I should have..... I must.....”

Other thoughts people have tend to be about all the things they haven’t done, or should have done. It is very easy to think “If only I just did that one thing” or “I should do this, this and this and then it will be better, and then I can relax”.



Are the expectations you have of yourself fair or realistic?

Would you expect the same things of your best friend, partner or relative?

When you feel relaxed, do the expectations you have of yourself change?

As you can see from the vicious circle, if you are stressed then your thoughts are likely to be stressed ones rather than happy thoughts. If this is the case, it may be helpful to consider some answers to the above questions. Or think about the following:



It would be helpful if I could adjust what I expect of myself.

If I don't meet the expectations I have of myself, it doesn't mean I've failed, it means life is challenging at the moment.

My relative or friend would say. I'm doing enough.

I am doing enough.

"I'm worried about my friend/relative"

Finally, when stressed and worried, it may be that you have thoughts and worries linked to the person you are caring for. After thinking about your friend or relative for so long, in such difficult circumstances, you will continue to be concerned about them. If you haven't already done so it may be helpful to think about:



What would your friend or relative say if they knew you were worrying about them?

What would the mental health professionals say?

When you feel more relaxed do you continue to have these thoughts as frequently?

It is unrealistic to expect any carer to put their relative or friend out of their mind entirely. However, if you can consider some of the above questions you may find that you worry a little less.



There are times, when I am more relaxed, where I am less worried about my friend/relative.

My friend/relative would say I am doing enough, that other people can support them.

I can only do what I can do. I have limits, but that's because I'm human.

It may also be helpful to consider some practical strategies that may help you worry less. These may include:

- Using a problem solving approach to address a specific worry.
- Relapse planning.
- Sharing some of your caring responsibilities, so you can take some time to look after yourself.

Mindfulness

Another approach is to learn mindfulness where you learn to attend to what is happening in the present moment, using techniques like meditation, breathing and yoga. The focus of this approach is not so much to change your thoughts (or emotions) but to become aware of and familiar with them, so helping you to manage them.

Managing your mood

Looking after yourself physically, enjoying a range of activities and doing what you can to tackle some of your worrying thoughts will help with your stress levels. However, you could also consider ways of managing your mood more directly.

Feelings, like fear and anger are difficult things to experience. They are unpleasant and, as animals avoid anything unpleasant, humans will often do anything they can to avoid such feelings. Using alcohol, drugs, food, distracting oneself with work or TV are all coping mechanisms and, in the short term, may help reduce stress. However, such feelings are unlikely to just go away, so it can be helpful to allow yourself to feel them. Unpleasant though they are, these feelings do pass. Using the following strategies may help:

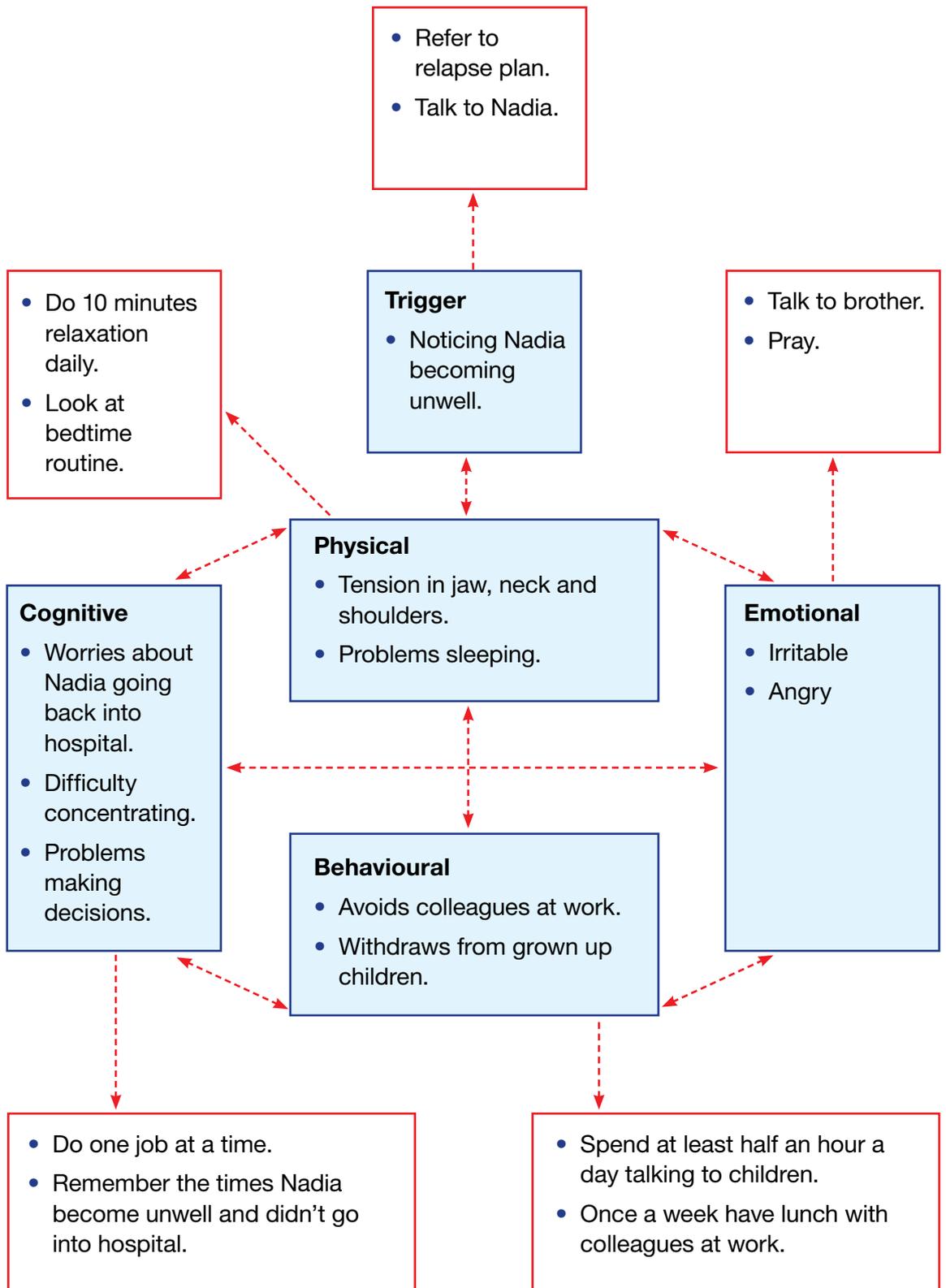
- Acknowledging and expressing your stress or worry, either to yourself, a close friend or relative or a member of your faith community may help.
- Writing a diary about how you are feeling, ending with a “gratitude journal” listing 3 things you are grateful for.
- Praying or meditating.
- Consider things that give you a sense of hope or tap into your sense of humour.
- Temporarily distracting yourself by doing some of the activities you identified in the section on “Taking Action: Doing Something Different”.
- Having some respite – can you take a short break away from it all?

Pulling it all together

There is a lot here to think about, and there is a lot you may want to do to manage your stress. You may have identified a number of different strategies to try. Before making any changes it may be helpful to pull it all together, in the way that Rashid did (see opposite). Previous diagrams have shown how stress is a vicious circle. The strategies Rashid, and you, have identified are ways out of this circle. They are your “exit points”, if you like. The boxes in red show Rashid’s “exit” points. He wasn’t able to do all of them at once but, over time, built up a number of routes out of his vicious circle.

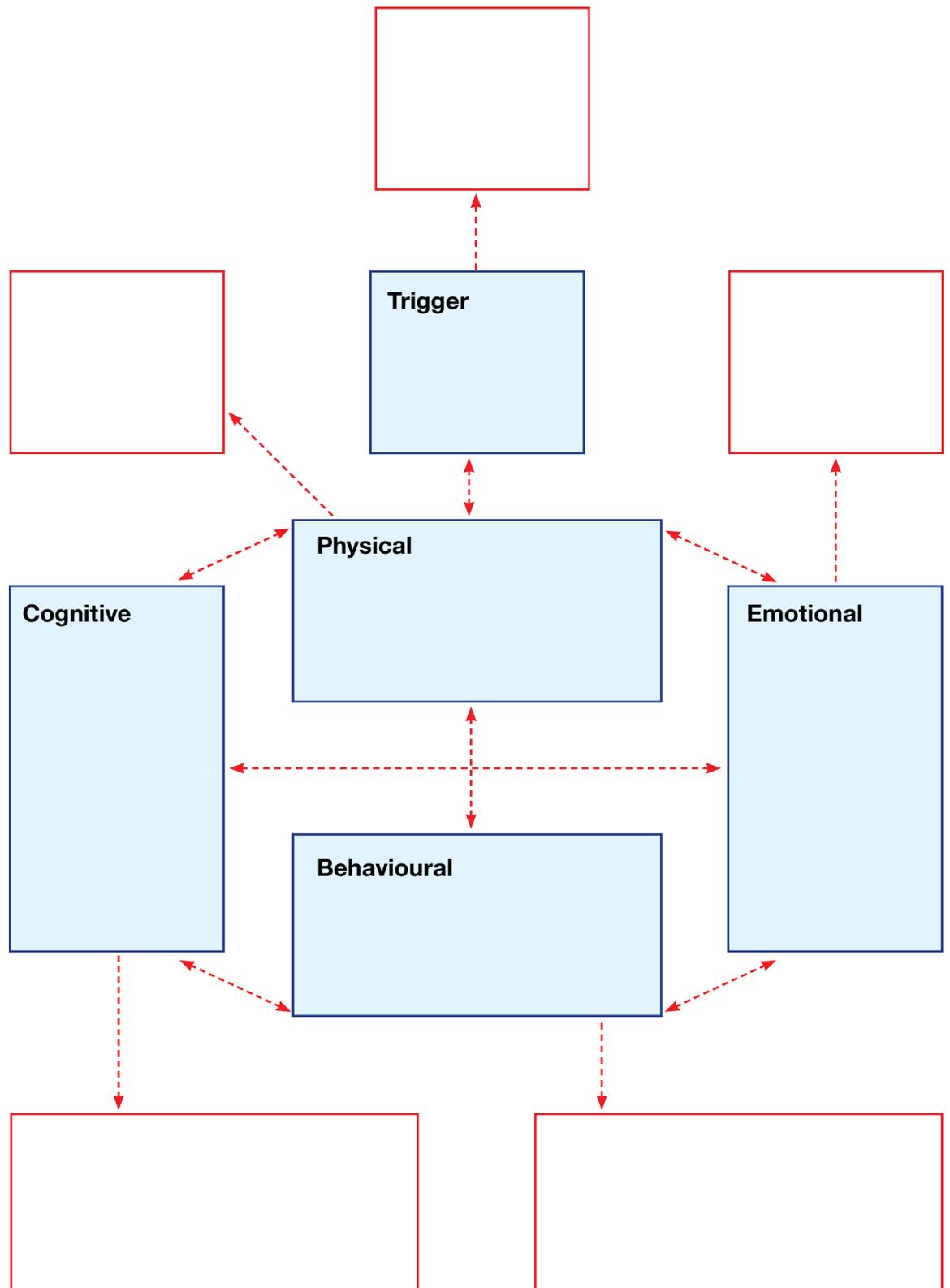


Rashid's exit points



Your exit points

Having seen Rashid's example, and going back to the boxes you filled out earlier, can you think what would help you to deal with your stress reactions? Fill in your ideas in the boxes below.



8.3 How to sustain it

You may have found a number of different ways to manage your stress. It may be tempting to try all of them at once and this might work for you. However, it may feel overwhelming to try such a lot of change all in one go. It can also be difficult to think about keeping going when a crisis happens. The next few pages look at ways of addressing these issues.

Making changes

Change can be stressful, and making a change to manage your stress may be stressful in itself!

There are a number of ways to make it easier:

- Decide on one strategy at a time.
- Choose the thing that is easiest to change first.
- Know that change takes time and practise. Habits are formed by doing things frequently, regularly and over and over again. Once you have identified one stress management strategy, keep doing it, over and over, until it's become habit.
- Think about the benefits of doing this behaviour.

Stress management emergency plan

When life gets really stressful, often the first thing to go are the things that help us to manage our stress. When life becomes difficult priorities have to change, including those aimed at looking after you. It's unrealistic or unfair to expect yourself to maintain your routine at particularly difficult times so it may be helpful to think about what "emergency substitute" you can put in place of your regular management strategies.



Aleisha

For example, Aleisha's hours at work were cut so that she was no longer able to afford a massage every month. She realised she was missing the aromatherapy products. So, for several months she bought some nice smelling toiletries and found some time to have a regular, relaxing bath once a week. While this wasn't the same as having a massage, it was cheaper and met her need to feel pampered.



Gerard

Gerard found that when his wife, Maeve, became unwell he wasn't able to go to the weekly carers' group he found so helpful. However, he was able to speak with his friend who regularly attended and kept him updated with everything that had been discussed. In this way he was able to have some support and a link with other carers which helped sustain him until he was able to go once a month and then even more regularly when things became more settled.

Once you have found some regular strategies that work for you, can you think of some “emergency substitutes” that might do a similar thing when things are very difficult?

Regular stress management	Emergency substitute
20 minute walk, 3 times a week.	5 minute walk just to get some air.
Going to the pictures every week with a friend.	Watching a DVD at home with some popcorn.
Monthly massage or other complementary treatment.	Buy a nice beauty product and use once a week at home.
Going to football every week.	Watching the highlights on TV.



Regular stress management	Emergency substitute

8.4 Others supporting you

Most of this booklet has asked you to focus on what you can do for yourself. However, it is also important to think about what other people could do.

Caring

It may be that you feel, at times, unable to cope. If this is the case, can you “share the care”? Taking a problem-solving approach for practical problems like organising respite or other support in caring for your friend or relative may be helpful. Can you make a conscious choice about how much care you do, and seek support if necessary?

Health and mental health

Keeping in touch with your GP, especially if you have a good relationship with them, is a good way of making sure you have someone who is aware of your mental and physical well-being. Counselling and psychological services, sometimes called IAPT (Improving Access to Psychological Therapies) may also provide support for your emotional well-being. Finally, finding a complementary therapist who you like and trust and who offers therapies such as aromatherapy, reflexology, acupuncture and massage may help in both respects. Sometimes local carers' centres offer access to these, or put on 'pampering' days for carers.

Spirituality

For some people, one important way of taking care of themselves is to ensure their spiritual needs are met. Spirituality means how people make sense of life (and death) and their place in the world. It can help people find a sense of self-worth and value, maintain their strength and hope in times of adversity as well as providing solace.

If you have a faith, you may find your spiritual needs met by attending a place where you can meet people of your own faith community, pray and draw on the writing and teachings of your faith to support and guide your life. Praying and practice at home are ways of linking in with this part of your life, particularly when it is difficult to leave home.

If you do not have a faith or religion it may be helpful to consider whether you have spiritual needs, or need to find a way of making sense of what has been happening for you and your family or friend. Practices that may help with this are:

- Considering connecting with a faith community that fits for you.
- Focus on the values and ethics that you believe to be important as a way of guiding you.
- Meditation and mindfulness practices.

Family and friends

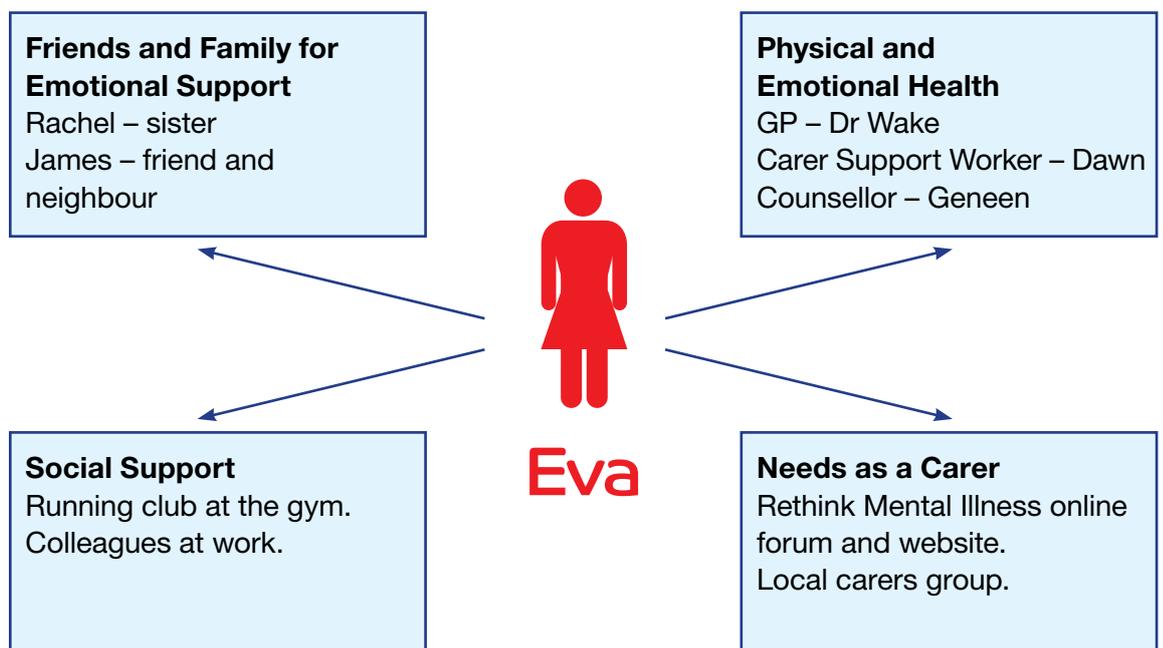
It is possible that in your caring role, you have had less time to spend with family and friends. When thinking about some of the strategies or activities you would like to take up to manage your stress, it may be helpful to think about whether you would like to include a friend or family member. For example, if you decide that a regular daily walk would be a good way of managing stress, friends or family might be able to join you. Making time for friends and family, by an occasional text or email, if meeting up is too difficult, will help you feel in touch and supported by others.

Community

One of the things that can be very difficult about being a carer is the isolation you may experience. You may not feel that you can leave your relative or friend. Perhaps concern about how others view or react to mental health issues has resulted in you withdrawing from friends. Having a friend or someone we can confide in helps mental well-being, so it is really important that you try to maintain your social contacts. It may be helpful to pull together a list of the people and organisations who already support you, or who may do so in the future.

Eva's support network

Eva spent some time thinking about who she had around her and the sort of support they provided. Having done this, she was much clearer about who to call on, for what and when.





What might your map look like?

Do you need to add others to your group of “supporters”? If so, what actions could you take to find people you feel comfortable with?

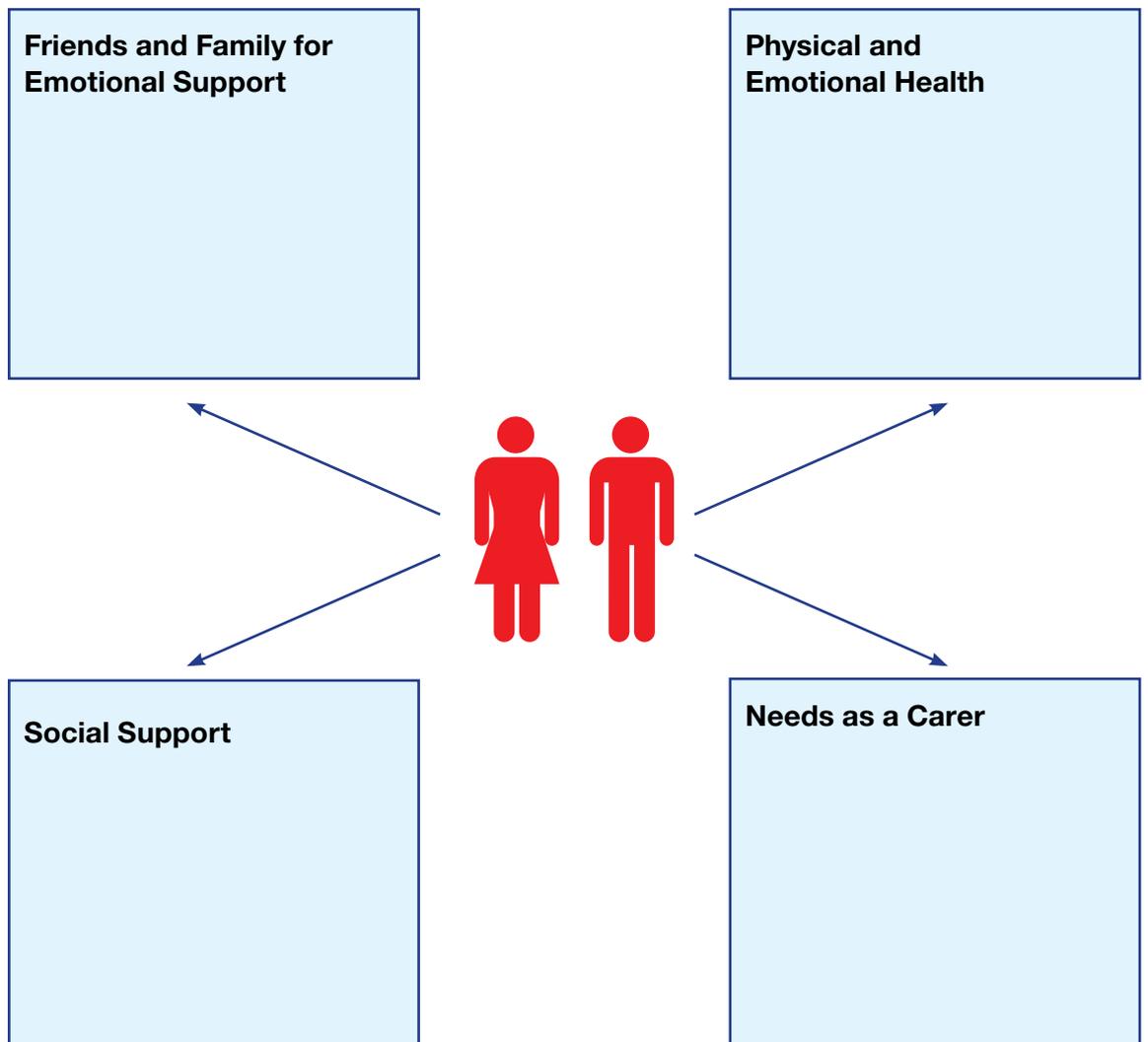
Could you get involved in mental health in a broader way?

Join a support group and make friends with people with similar experiences?



Your support network

Take time to think about where you might find support for yourself.



8.5 Goal setting



This booklet has discussed the importance of looking after you. Having read it, it may be helpful to think about setting some specific goals aimed at meeting your own needs.

What strategy would you like to take up within the next week?

What would you like to be doing in 6 months' time?

What would you like to be doing in a year's time?

When making a plan for achieving a goal it is important to be **SMART about it. Goals should be:**

Specific describe it as specifically as possible.

Measurable how much/how long will it be for?

Achievable is it possible?

Realistic can you achieve it given the time and resources you have?

Time limited when will it be achieved by?

Life can get in the way of achieving goals, so it is important to be flexible and, if things aren't going according to plan, review and adjust things accordingly. Being realistic is also crucial. It's better to start off with a small, realistic goal that you have every chance of reaching, rather than aiming too high and being unable to achieve it. Finally, it is also important to think about the steps that may need to lead up to the goal. For example:



Kim

Kim wanted to go abroad on holiday but had not been away for longer than a few hours or so for a long time. A week abroad felt like a big step, so she developed a plan with small steps, starting with regular days out, for several weeks. After a few months of doing this, she went to stay with a friend several streets away for a night, and did this for a few weeks, before going away for two nights in a city a couple of hours' drive away. As time went by she became more confident in her ability to plan and in her brothers' capacity to manage, with other support, without her.



What goal have you identified for 6 months' time?

What steps might lead to this?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Booklet 5 has a specific way of goal setting, which may also be helpful to look at.

8.6 Summary

Stress is a natural response to challenging situations and sometimes it resolves itself. At other times, particularly when people have been under considerable stress for some time, resolving or managing stress may need attending to. This booklet has described a number of ways you might try to manage your stress. Making a formal plan like the ones described here may feel more than you can manage at the moment. That's OK. Pick it up when you have more time and space to spend on thinking about looking after yourself. If all you do is take one or two suggestions and adopt them, you will find that, used often, they will help improve your physical and emotional well-being.

8.7 Key learning points

- Caring for someone with a mental health problem can be stressful.
- When we are stressed, we react in different ways in terms of what we do, how we feel in our bodies, how our mood changes and in the way we think.
- With practice, it is possible to learn ways of managing all these different reactions.
- Maintaining our social contacts is helpful for managing stress, so continuing to meet with family and friends is important.
- Taking breaks or availing of respite can help us to carry on caring.
- Keeping a balance so that we do some fun things that make us happy and maintaining a sense of humour helps.
- Looking after your own needs is not being selfish. If we don't do this, we will not be able to continue to support our relative

Resources



Carers Direct, Caring with Confidence Online Learning

 www.nhs.uk/CarersDirect/carers-learning-online/Pages/carers-online-learning.aspx

Carers UK

 www.carersuk.org/help-and-advice/looking-after-you

Rethink Mental Illness

 www.rethink.org/living_with_mental_illness/caring/index.html

Relaxation and other podcasts from The Mental Health Foundation

 www.mentalhealth.org.uk/help-information/podcasts/

Mindfulness from the Mental Health Foundation

 www.bemindful.co.uk

Thank you to . . .

Producing a resource such as this relies on the support and contribution of a wide range of people. We consulted widely at the various stages of the development of the material in terms of content, layout and presentation, and would like to thank all of those who gave so generously of their time and ideas.

In terms of initial discussions on content, Thurstine Bassett, Alison Faulkner, Michele Gladden, Becky Heelis, Peter Woodhams and Aiesha Wright were particularly helpful. Martin Atchison and Chris Mansell kindly provided materials for some of the case examples and exercises. Thanks also to Claudia Benzies and the 'COOL' group of carers for allowing us to share some of their material on recovery.

One of the biggest tasks was reading through the earlier versions of the different sections which was a really time-consuming activity. We wanted to ensure that the material is meaningful, helpful and presented in a way that is easily accessible to carers and family members, so we enlisted the help of family members recruited through Rethink Mental Illness and the Meriden Family Programme. We are so grateful to those helped with this task – June Cooley, George Gladden, Michele Gladden, Edward Haslam, Christine Lewis, Philippa Lewis, Philippa Lowe, Maggie Morgans, Jeanette Partridge and Peter Woodhams. A number of other carers who equally spent hours reading through drafts and providing feedback did not wish to be named in person, so our heartfelt thanks to those 'anonymous' family members for all their time, commitment and valuable comments.

Special thanks to Peter Woodhams for his help in preparing the final version of the booklet 'Being a Carer', to Paula Conneely for help with the final versions of the sections on Relapse Management, Communication Skills and Problem-Solving, and to Sam Farooq for all her attention to detail in proof-reading the material, and all the other administrative tasks such as liaising with family members and the design and printing team. Finally thanks to Mark Teagles from White Halo Design for design and layout, and for his patience and flexibility in producing the finished product.

About the authors

Gráinne Fadden is a Consultant Clinical Psychologist based in Birmingham and Solihull Mental Health NHS Trust, Honorary Senior Research Fellow at the University of Birmingham and Director of the Meriden Family Programme. The cascade method of training and system of organisational change for improving services to families developed through the Meriden Programme have been adopted by several organisations within the UK and abroad. The Programme has been the recipient of numerous awards for 'Modernising Mental Health Services' and for 'Mental Health Innovation'. She was awarded the prestigious Marsh Lifetime Achievement Award by Rethink Mental Illness in 2009 for her outstanding contribution to mental health. Gráinne has been involved in family work and research throughout her career, and has written extensively on the effects of mental health problems on families, on how family members can be supported, and the training of mental health professionals. She links with a range of national bodies on issues relating to families and carers and has delivered training around the world.

Carolyn James qualified as a Clinical Psychologist in 2003. Currently she works in clinical health psychology and training, and prior to this she was part of a child and adolescent mental health team in East Birmingham. Before training Carolyn worked as a Research Assistant on a number of projects, including the Meriden Programme. Carolyn is proud to have been part of the Programme since the very beginning. She has maintained her links with the team since that time and returned to talking with families and therapists as part of her doctoral research. Carolyn was interested to find out what helped engagement in family therapy and, as a result of her work, developed a theory about some of the factors that therapists may need to consider when talking with families about Behavioural Family Therapy (BFT).

Vanessa Pinfold is a health services researcher. She joined Rethink Mental Illness in 2003 to establish a research team within the charity. Previously she worked at the Institute of Psychiatry, Kings College London. She is currently working as a part time research fellow at Rethink Mental Illness and is chair of The McPin Foundation – a small family charity that supports mental health research and promotes mental well being through innovative projects.

Vanessa has always had an interest in mental health carers and through research programmes has sought to develop practical tools to assist families and relatives of people with mental illness. She has been involved in the Time to Change campaign to end mental health discrimination and the re-development of Rethink Mental Illness 'Caring and Coping' training programme. Vanessa has also led the development of an online package to assist practitioners to work with families through timely and appropriate information sharing in mental health.

Notes

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