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# SELF COMPASSION GUIDE FOR CARERS

CARERS WEEK 2023

5-11 JUNE 2023

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## Introduction

### Finding the balance of wellbeing

Life as an unpaid carer can be very rewarding, but it can also be exhausting and overwhelming. As coordinator for the Mindful Carers Project, carers have shared their experiences with me, and how they have coped through the negative feelings which can sometimes surface in times of stress. Some can feel resentment that their life is no longer what they had planned. Some resent their loved one's illness or condition. They can also experience guilt – thinking they are not doing enough, for taking time for themselves, or being unable to take away suffering. These feelings can sometimes lead to compassion fatigue. Then add on the daily worries and anxieties of being a carer, as well as the extra stress of battling to get appropriate support, and carers can soon be on the path to burnout.

However, these experiences are extremely common and shouldn't be seen as a weakness. In fact, being aware of your feelings and emotions is a real strength and helps you to understand why and when you need to prioritise your own health and wellbeing. It's so important that you don't keep feelings and emotions to yourself. Your feelings are always valid, and you are always deserving and worthy of empathy and support. All of us wear a mask at times, but the most important thing we can do is to talk: to a family member, to a friend, to a professional. When we do this, it helps us to make sense of difficult experiences, relationships and situations and develop tools to help us cope better.

Each of us is unique, our caring roles are unique, and how we deal with difficulty will be unique too. This guide will provide some small, doable activities to help look after your wellbeing. They might not all be for everyone. The aim is to help you find what works for you and give you the ability to show yourself some kindness and compassion when it's needed most. Some carers have provided advice and ideas that have helped them, including the 'It's ok' section (page 5) and a Kindness Calendar (page 6). Why not print the calendar out and stick it up as a reminder to do something for yourself each day?

Louise Mitchell  
Mindful Carers Project



you are  
enough



## Wellbeing Tips

**Share kind words** – Words of kindness can bring a sense of comfort and safety which are both basic human needs that can help to reduce stress and anxiety. Make sure you give them to yourself too. Talk to yourself the way you would talk to a friend. Create three affirmations for yourself that you can read over regularly, or stick a note up somewhere as a constant reminder – “I am loved...I am enough...I am capable.”

**Take a break** – Take 5-10 minutes out for yourself and acknowledge how you are feeling. Take a moment to breathe and sit with the feeling, not judging it, simply letting it be and then offer yourself some compassion: “May I be kind to myself”, “May I accept myself as I am”, “May I be patient with myself”. By doing this, you are giving yourself permission to feel and move through your emotions in a way that feels safe without becoming overwhelmed.

**Create a comfort list** – Create a list of things you can do that bring you comfort. It can be helpful to base these around your senses. Sight – a folder of comforting photos or quotes on your phone. Sound – a comforting playlist, the sound of outdoors. Smell – fresh coffee, perfume, candles, essential oils. Touch – the grass in the garden on your feet, a warm blanket, give yourself a hug! Taste – a good cup of coffee or a treat.

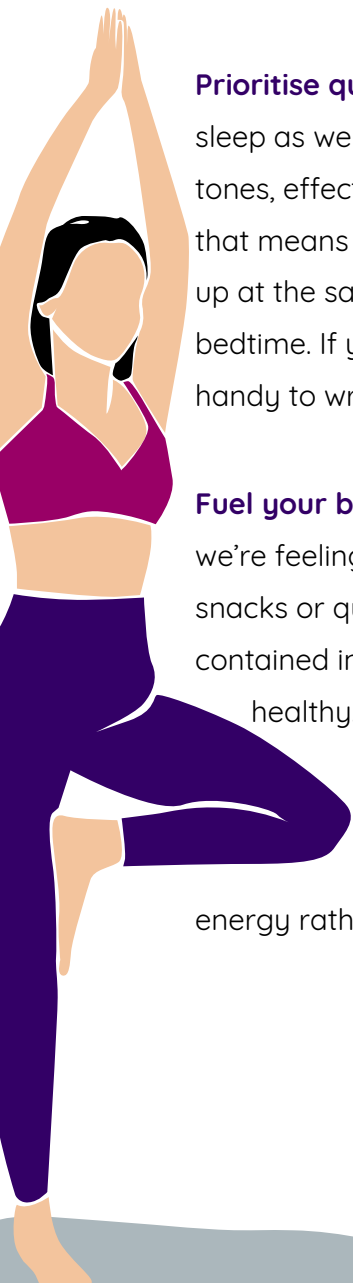
You can also include activities that are comforting – colouring in, reading, playing with pets, sorting out a drawer in the house, washing the car. Doing any of these things with the intention of bringing yourself comfort is an act of self-compassion.



**Feel-good movement** – At times we can hear unhelpful messages about working out. If you feel pressure or guilt about exercising, this is not healthy. Ask yourself “what will feel good for my body today?” Some days that might mean resting, others it might mean getting outdoors for a walk, or it could mean having a dance in the kitchen! Exercise shouldn’t feel like a punishment, but something that is enjoyable and makes you feel good afterwards.

**Prioritise quality, refreshing sleep** – Caring is exhausting enough without a lack of good sleep as well. Make your bedroom as conducive to this as possible with little clutter, calming tones, effective curtains and comfortable bedding. Try to use your bedroom for sleep – that means no TV or other tech if possible. Set a good routine – try to go to sleep and wake up at the same times each day. And avoid heavy meals, caffeine and alcohol too close to bedtime. If you find your mind is active and you can’t switch off, keep a notebook handy to write down thoughts or to-do lists so you can leave them for the morning.

**Fuel your body effectively** – focus on fuelling your body with plenty of whole foods. When we’re feeling mentally or physically exhausted, it’s easy to reach for the unhealthy, sugary snacks or quick and convenient ready meals. This doesn’t do us any favours. The nutrients contained in fresh or frozen fruit and vegetables help to keep us physically and mentally healthy. Protein and healthy fats also keep our brains working efficiently. Eating regularly and consuming foods that release energy slowly help to keep our blood sugar levels steady – things like wholegrain bread and cereal, nuts, seeds, brown pasta and brown rice are all good sources of slow release energy rather than sugary snacks that give us a quick boost and crash.





**It's okay to...**

**-Not be ok.** Carers face countless difficulties on a day to day basis. It's ok to feel like you're not managing. The most important thing you can do is find someone to talk to. Talking things through helps to relieve tension rather than keeping things bottled up inside. It also helps you see things from another perspective and come up with potential solutions.

**-Feel negative emotions.** You might feel angry, bitter, or resentful. Allow yourself to acknowledge how you are feeling and why. Then do something kind for yourself.

**-Feel bored of doing the same thing.** You might feel like your life is no longer what you wanted or planned. Find some things you enjoy to add to your routine.

**-Feel lonely.** You may no longer have the opportunities to get out and meet friends. Try to seek out other opportunities for meaningful connection. They might be face to face or online.

**-Feel exhausted.** It's common for carers to face stress, anxiety and burnout. Do whatever helps you to feel better, even for a little while.

**-Feel like you're grieving.** You might have lost a lot in a relatively short period of time. This could be your identity, your social circle, your daily routine. This can feel like a grieving process that you are going through. If you're feeling low, speak to your GP about additional wellbeing support.

CARER KINDNESS CALENDAR - KINDNESS ONE DAY AT A TIME

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|--|--|---|---|--|--|--|
| <b>1</b><br>Connect with nature – go for a walk etc. | <b>2</b><br>Phone or Zoom a friend for a catch up.       | <b>3</b><br>Chat to a neighbour over the fence.               | <b>4</b><br>Contact HSCT Carers' Co-ordinator.            | <b>5</b><br>Find a good TV series.     | <b>6</b><br>Try cooking a new recipe for dinner. | <b>7</b><br>Take your lunch outside and stock up on vitamin D. |
| <b>8</b><br>Treat yourself to a takeaway.            | <b>9</b><br>Seek support – it's a form of active coping. | <b>10</b><br>Connect with a key worker to access advice.      | <b>11</b><br>Give yourself permission to say no.          | <b>12</b><br>Find a new hobby.         | <b>13</b><br>Download a wellbeing app.           | <b>14</b><br>Declutter.  |
| <b>15</b><br>Take time for yourself.                 | <b>16</b><br>Dance, dance, dance.                        | <b>17</b><br>Watch some comedy.                               | <b>18</b><br>Random acts of kindness.                     | <b>19</b><br>Have an outdoor meeting.  | <b>20</b><br>Do something active.                | <b>21</b><br>Go exploring locally.                             |
| <b>22</b><br>Get natural light early in the day.     | <b>23</b><br>Do a body scan meditation.                  | <b>24</b><br>Eat healthy and drink water.                     | <b>25</b><br>Turn your housework or chores into exercise. | <b>26</b><br>Leave social media alone. | <b>27</b><br>Get to bed on time.                 | <b>28</b><br>Do stretch and breathe exercises.                 |
| <b>29</b><br>Let go of self-criticism.               | <b>30</b><br>Write down five things you're grateful for. | <b>31</b><br>Find three things to look forward to next month. |   |  |  |  |



## Further information and support

If you are stressed out by your caring role, there is support available. The Mindful Carers Project can help with a range of programmes to improve your physical and mental wellbeing. We offer offers different types of support for your mental health, including Resilience Programmes, an Online Support Group and the opportunity to develop a plan focusing on your own wellbeing through six x 1:1 sessions.

<https://www.amh.org.uk/services/mindful-carers-project/>

You can also contact your HSC Trust Carers' Coordinator. They provide numerous activities and support to help carers deal with the various demands placed upon them. Your GP will also be able to provide professional support and make referrals to other services.

### A few other helpful sources of support available in NI:

Carers NI – help where you are <https://www.carersuk.org/ni/>

NI Direct Carers section <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/carers->

Remember if you are in crisis please contact Lifeline on 0808 808 8000 or by Textphone on 18001 0808 808 8000, trained counsellors are available by phone 24/7.

This guide has been created with help from our *Mindful Carers Advocacy Panel*.

