

Age Well

Carers

Introduction

NHS England define a carer as follows: “A carer is anyone, including children and adults who looks after a family member, partner or friend who needs help because of their illness, frailty, disability, a mental health problem or an addiction and cannot cope without their support. The care they give is unpaid”¹. National (2021) research shows more women are carers than men and the largest group of carers are aged 55-64 (24%) and 45-54 (20%) although 23% of carers are aged over 65².

Caring can be rewarding, give a sense of purpose and increase closeness with a loved one. Care giving can provide life satisfaction³ and research highlights satisfaction is associated with previous affectionate relationship, caring via own initiative and maintaining leisure time⁴. Carers with enough household income and who are healthier also report greater satisfaction from caring as do those that participate in physical and social activities and have larger informal social support networks⁵.

Caring can also have negative impacts on physical and mental health and wellbeing with 30% of carers to a national survey reporting bad or very bad mental health and 25% reporting bad or very bad physical health (2021)⁶. Carers are more likely than the general public to have two or more long term conditions, with high blood pressure and physical strain/injury being the most common⁷. Other issues include lack of sleep and impact of lifting a cared for person. Poorer health is also associated with number of hours caring per week and the amount of time being a carer⁸.

National research carried out by Carers UK⁹ found that carers struggled to participate in physical activity due to their caring role. The research found that 76% of carers aged 55+ were not able to do as much exercise as they would like. Carers were also more likely to be ‘inactive’ (46%, for this survey defined as less than 30 minutes of activity a week) compared to the general population (33%) and less likely to be ‘active’ (14%, meeting government guidance of 150 minutes of activity). Key barriers to activity include time to take part (88%), motivation (71%), affordability (67%) and having no-one to go with (59%). Motivation was also more complex with the research finding inability to put themselves first and guilt (both in terms of not doing exercise and doing exercise) being reported.

Carers also report higher rates of loneliness with a national survey from Carers UK finding 90% of respondents reported feeling lonely with 34% saying they were ‘often’ or ‘always’ lonely¹⁰. Reasons for loneliness include not being able to leave the person being cared for, lack of time to see family and friends, the extra cost of caring and not being able to afford to socialise and others not understanding the caring role/carers not feeling comfortable talking about caring¹¹.

Carers in Merton

There are an estimated 16,000 to 20,000 residents in Merton who are unpaid carers as of 2019¹².

Nationally, the number of carers feeling they have as much contact as they would like is reported in the 'Personal Social Services, Survey of Adult Carers in England' and declined from 32.5% in 2018/19 to 28% in 2021/22¹³. The number of carers reporting they had little social contact and were socially isolated also increased from 17.4% in 2018/19 to 20.9% in 2021/22¹⁴. Data for 2018/19 estimated that 26% of older carers aged 65+ in Merton had as much social contact as they would like. This was significantly lower than England (34.5%) and London (34.3%)¹⁵.

Services such as Carers Support Merton provide a range of services for carers including advice, information and support. Other organisations such as the Alzheimer's Society and Mencap also provide specialist support for carers.

Service User and Resident Views

Consultation with carers was carried out to inform the Merton Carers Strategy 2021 – 2025¹². This found

- 70% of carers agreed or strongly agreed that their caring role was often rewarding.
- 70% of carers reported their physical health had deteriorated due to their caring role.
- 67% of carers reported their emotional wellbeing had deteriorated due to their caring role.
- Having the time and cost both impacted carers ability to exercise, eat healthily and to look after their wellbeing.
- Carers struggled to find the time to attend health appointments.

Further Information:

- Social connectedness, loneliness, and isolation amongst older people
- Dementia
- Disability

References:

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