SANE

FACTSHEET

CARER MENTAL FATIGUE AND BURNOUT

QUICK FACTS

- Families, friends and carers provide support to people living with mental health issues, but often don’t get the support they need themselves.
- Burnout can include fatigue, cynicism, low mood, and feelings of guilt or shame.
- Families and friends can benefit from self-care, time out, improving boundaries, and getting their own support.

WHAT IS CARER BURNOUT?

It is possible for people living with mental health issues to access the right types of treatment and supports, and live a full and meaningful life. But recovery can include ups and downs.

Family members, friends, and other carers often provide a range of emotional and practical supports to people living with mental health issues. Supporting someone in this role can be demanding, stressful, and even exhausting at times:

- Mental health issues often affect how people relate to and understand others. They can have a ‘ripple effect’ on families and friends, creating tension, uncertainty, troubled emotions and big changes in how people live their lives.
- Many symptoms of mental health issues first appear when a person is in their late teens or early twenties. This means that symptoms are likely to occur when the person is still living with their family.
- Families and friends may also take on the role of day-to-day care and support. This often happens with little training or support, or acknowledgment of their own needs and mental health.
- Sometimes family and friends are not invited into treatment-related decisions, or their own needs are not considered a priority. This can lead to feelings of confusion or them feeling unsure or devalued.

ABOUT CARER BURNOUT

Burnout is the state of feeling emotionally and physically exhausted due to being exposed to excessive and prolonged periods of stress.

When families, friends, and carers are exposed to these periods, it's common to experience signs and symptoms such as:

- fatigue and exhaustion
- feeling unable to complete tasks to the same standard as before
- changes in appetite
- changes in sleeping patterns
- loss of motivation
- feeling helpless
- increased cynicism and negative view of current situation
- decreased satisfaction or sense of accomplishment
- feeling a sense of guilt or shame, or doubting skills and ability to support others
- social withdrawal
- frequent headaches and tension
- often getting sick (due to lowered immunity)
- using alcohol or drugs to cope

Many of these symptoms are also similar to experiences of depression in a depressive episode and can feel just as overwhelming. If you or someone you know are experiencing these symptoms, it's important to act now and prevent the effects of burnout becoming worse.

PREVENTING BURNOUT

When supporting someone else, it's important for families, friends, and carers to look after themselves, too. A range of self-care strategies can help prevent burnout, or reduce its impact:

- Looking after physical health through exercise, healthy eating, and getting enough sleep.
- Allow for regular 'time out' or respite. Families and friends need time to themselves to relax, socialise, or look after themselves.
- Starting or reviving a hobby. Hobbies are a great way to unwind, and focus on something personal.
- Connect with others. Socialising with supportive people and increasing time spent with them can help with emotional support, and reduce stress levels.
- Talk about feelings. It's important not to 'bottle up' tough emotions.
- Don't try to do too much. Families, friends, and carers should pace themselves, and keep an eye on stress levels.
- Managing the caring role

It can be difficult to know how best to support a person who is experiencing mental health issues. Most people receive no formal training in this role, and learn as they go. While

everyone is different, some of these strategies might be helpful to improve relationships and have a healthy mindset:

- Learn from others. Find out about any training for family carers of people with mental health issues, and consider joining a support group.
- Be prepared by learning as much as possible about the relevant mental health issue, what helps, and getting a sense of what to expect in the future.
- Acknowledge limitations and considering what they can reasonably do to support the person.
- Know it's okay to set boundaries around the care and support being provided. It's okay to say 'no', and to be firm around the care and support provided. It's okay to say 'no', and to be firm.
- Learn about helpful communication techniques to manage conflict and communicate everyone's wants and needs.
- Ask to be involved. If possible, ask about becoming involved in treatment and care-related decisions. Many health professionals will be willing to involve families and friends, but won't always provide the invitation themselves.
- Prepare in advance of any crises. Families and friends are often the first person responding to a crisis. There are actions that can be taken to help prevent or manage crises. For example, families can create a safety plan together and have emergency contact information close by.

GETTING PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT

Families, friends and carers often prioritise the mental wellbeing of the people they support. While it is great to support others, it is impossible to care for others when reserves are low. Sometimes speaking with a GP, psychologist, counsellor, or other mental health professional can help re-frame the negative view developed during burnout. They can help families, friends and carers manage symptoms of burnout, assist in setting up and implementing boundaries, and help develop skills and knowledge to support them in the caring role. For this reason, it is important for families, friends, and carers to sometimes put themselves first. This can be an extremely hard thing to do but it can make a world of difference.

Every person will need to find what works for them and it's normal for this to take time. Effective support is available for families, friends, and carers.

SANE is for people with recurring, persistent or complex mental health issues and trauma, and for their families, friends and communities.

At SANE you can choose from a range of free support services, including counselling, community forums, peer support and groups, information and resources. Visit www.sane.org to learn more, or contact us on 1800 18 SANE.

SUPPORT AND RESOURCES

- Lifeline: 13 11 14
- Mental Health Carers Australia: https://www.mentalhealthcarersaustralia.org.au/

- Carer Gateway: https://www.carergateway.gov.au/