

Top Tips for Mental Health Carers during COVID-19

By HelpingMinds

Updated 25 March 2020

The COVID-19 pandemic and new social distancing measures have resulted in more Australians staying indoors and limiting their normal daily routine. This is not an easy situation for anyone to manage, however for over 240,000 people in Australia who are unpaid mental health carers, it can be even harder.

We have spoken to our counsellors and support workers and have compiled a comprehensive list of top tips to manage the self-isolation and social distancing guidelines, to keep yourself and the person you care for, stay calm and safe.

Self-care and coping strategies

- ✓ Keep up with your own **coping strategies** as a carer by taking time for yourself. This can be as simple as having a shower, take a few deep breaths, light a candle or have a cup of tea.
- ✓ **Limit the amount of COVID-19 news** you are watching so it doesn't become overwhelming. Twice a day for 10 minutes is healthy. Anything over that may be distressing.
- ✓ Stay grounded by **tuning in to your 5 senses** a couple times a day: what things can you hear, see, smell, feel, taste? This is a great way to ground yourself and be mindful of the little things that are happening around you, despite the uncertainty.
- ✓ Try a **creative hobby**, such as drawing, journaling, writing, cooking, singing or dancing.
- ✓ Schedule in some **mindfulness** every day, such as breathing exercises or download a meditation app or podcast.
- ✓ If you have a pet, take the time to interact with it. Stroke, cuddle, talk and **play with your pet**.
- ✓ Contact your GP for a **mental health care plan** if your anxiety is heightened. Due to COVID-19 regulations for health practitioners, please call your GP first to make an appointment.
- ✓ Reach out to **friends and family** over the phone or try video calling. Having a friendly voice can calm you down and help shift perspective. **Please reach out, you are not a burden.**
- ✓ Social Media is a great way to **stay connected** with family and friends.
- ✓ Ask a friend to be a **pen pal** over email.

Page 1

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Maintain a strict routine when in self-isolation

- ✓ When in self-isolation, **keep to your normal routine every day**. This includes engaging in your regular self-care routines such as waking up at your normal time, showering, getting dressed for the day and maintaining as much normality as you can.
- ✓ Maintain **physical activity** by finding alternative exercise you can do at home. There are lots of great exercise videos online, try a YouTube tutorial.
- ✓ Ensure that you, and the person you care for, get exposed to **plenty of day light** to help with your sleep/wake cycle. Open the curtains and turn the lights off during the day.
- ✓ Ensure you **get plenty of sleep**. Go to bed and rise at the same time. Try not to oversleep and aim for 7 to 9 hours a night.
- ✓ Maintain a **healthy and balanced diet** and don't forget to **keep hydrated**.
- ✓ If you can, **alternate the rooms you spend time in**. For example, create a routine where you spend an hour in your lounge room, then an hour outside in the garden, then hour having some morning tea and reading a book at the kitchen table etc.

Focus on goodness and kindness

- ✓ Look for the helpers, the healers, the compassion and the good in the world. **Focus on the positive things and encourage your loved ones to focus on this too**. There is lots of fear and uncertainty but there is also lots of kindness being shown to our fellow human beings.
- ✓ Think of a way you can engage in **random acts of kindness**. This will not only lift and encourage someone else but will also help with your own sense of purpose and self-worth at this time. A phone call, text or email to a friend you haven't see for a while, hand making a special gift that you can give someone once things have settled down etc.
- ✓ Try to **engage in something that makes you laugh** – a funny movie or Youtube video, tell silly jokes etc. Humour is an important coping strategy and a good belly laugh does wonders for our sense of wellness.

Page 2

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Maintain healthy communication and coping strategies in your Carer role

- ✓ As much as possible, continue with your normal routine to **maintain consistency and certainty** for the person you are caring for.
- ✓ Ensure that they are **following their normal plan** such as taking their medications at the same time, eating at normal mealtimes, following their safety and wellness plans etc.
- ✓ Try to **limit the amount of news and social media** they have access to and, instead, use that time to engage in another activity together such as a board game, a walk in your garden, bird spotting etc.
- ✓ **Give each other space**, move to different rooms at various times during the day so that you can have some time alone.
- ✓ Join the **carer forum online** to speak with other mental health carers across the state in similar situations. You are not alone.
<https://helpingminds.saneforums.org/t5/Carers-Forum/ct-p/carers-forum>
- ✓ If you need help with communication or coping strategies while engaging with the person you are caring for, please **give HelpingMinds a call** to help you with this situation. The current COVID-19 circumstances can possibly trigger and escalate mental health conditions and symptoms.
- ✓ Developing **safe, calm and effective communication strategies** is key to keeping yourself and them safe and well.
- ✓ If you haven't heard from your family member in a while, **give them a call to check in**.

Difficulty with mental health units/services

- ✓ You can phone the **HelpingMinds Advocacy team** for assistance if you are stuck with (hospital) discharge planning for your family member.
- ✓ You can call our Advocacy experts if you are experiencing **obstacles and barriers to communications** in a mental health unit, hospital or community mental health services.

Page 3

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If the person you care for becomes unwell or begins to decline

- ✓ When you have a fear of violence or are experiencing a violent situation due to your family member's mental illness, **please call 000**.
- ✓ If someone is mentally unwell and you are uncertain of the care they need, then contact **Mental Health Emergency Response Line (MHERL)** for advice. Perth metro 1300 555 788, Rural Link 1800 552 002, Peel Residents (Mandurah/Rockingham) 1800 676 822.
- ✓ If drugs or alcohol are the primary instigator of the mental health episode (volatile and aggressive behaviour are key indicators) please seek advice from **Alcohol and Drug Services** <https://www.mhc.wa.gov.au/getting-help/community-alcohol-and-drug-services/> or call the Alcohol & Drug Support Line on (08) 9442 5000 or 1800 198 024.

Phone support via HelpingMinds

If you are in WA and supporting someone with a mental illness
Call **HelpingMinds** on 1800 811 747, Monday – Friday between 8.30am - 4.30pm

Online Forums

SANE forums for Carers (staffed 24/7 by mental health professionals)

Helplines

Lifeline: 13 11 14 (24/7 crisis support)

Mental Health Emergency Response Line: 1300 555 788 (Metro WA), 1800 676 822 (Peel)

BeyondBlue: 1300 224 636 (24/7 support)

Headspace: 1800 650 890 (youth support, 9am - 1am)

Kids Helpline: 1800 55 1800 (24/7 kids support)

1800 Respect: 1800 737 732 (24/7 domestic violence support)

MensLine: 1300 78 99 78 (24/7 mental health support for men)

Qlife: 1800 184 527 (support for LGBTIQ+ Australians, 3pm - 12am)

SANE Help Centre: 1800 187 263 (anyone 10am - 10pm, Monday - Friday)

Page 4