

support  
in mind  
scotland

action for people affected by mental illness



# Supporting relatives and informal carers – top tips for mental health workers

**These top tip cards have been produced in partnership by NHS Education for Scotland and Support in Mind Scotland.**

**NHS Education for Scotland.** We are a special health board responsible for supporting NHS services in Scotland by developing and delivering education and training for those who work in NHSScotland.

[www.nes.scot.nhs.uk](http://www.nes.scot.nhs.uk)

**Support in Mind Scotland** works to improve the wellbeing and quality of life of people affected by serious mental illness. This includes those who are family members, carers and supporters. We seek to support and empower all those affected by mental illness.

[www.supportinmindscotland.org.uk/about-us](http://www.supportinmindscotland.org.uk/about-us)



**People with mental health problems** have a wider context to their lives than simply being a 'patient' or a diagnosis. It's critical to their **recovery** that they receive support when needed to maintain their **networks of supportive family and friends**.

***Who are carers?*** Support in Mind Scotland defines 'carers' as relatives, partners or friends who have had to change their lifestyle in order to support and/or take responsibility for another person who is experiencing mental health problems. These carers might not live with the person and might not contribute to daily support but are still concerned, involved and affected by the well-being of the person concerned.



*What are these tips for?* – to help busy staff remember the importance of carers in supporting people's recovery. Staff are only visitors to someone's life, relatives and carers are there all the time. Use these tips to help make sure carers get the support and information they need.

The tips come from carers of people with mental health problems who were asked questions about their experiences with mental health services in a survey carried out by **Support in Mind Scotland**.

Put yourself in the shoes of the carer and ask yourself **'How would I feel? What would I need to know and what support would help?'**

Carers may be new to the role of supporting someone or they may be 'old hands'. They may be carers through love, duty or obligation. Whatever their circumstances, **treat them as partners** in care.

**Have a specific named contact for carers** – a member of staff or visiting carers' support worker.

*Carers value professionals  
'A wonderful key worker understood my son and me!  
The consultant he has had for many years is fantastic.  
People who talk straight are appreciated.'*

When someone first becomes unwell, carers are unlikely to have knowledge of mental health problems, nor about the legal situation or services. **They don't know what they don't know** and they don't know what information they need.

Mental health workers need to understand this and **provide accessible and useful information without first being asked for it.**

*Good Information makes a huge difference*  
*'The most helpful thing about having good information about this illness was I could be much more useful to my daughter. I was more confident about doing the right thing to help her.'*

The information that carers say they want is about the **diagnosis, the outlook for the future, and treatment (particularly side effects of any medication)** of the person they support, including **what to do in a crisis**. Carers also value more **general information about mental health problems, types of treatment, availability of services and advice about finances, benefits and employment.**

*'We thought when a psychiatrist was brought in to talk to a group of us carers it was invaluable. Nobody had talked to us before about our daughter's difficulties. Nobody had explained or discussed the symptoms. You see this was a great way to do it because it was not a discussion about any individual.'*

*Carers may not be familiar with the concept of recovery.*

It is important that services include this key message in their communication with carers and explain what recovery means.

*'It helped me understand my sister at a deeper level. It helped me cope better – I understood symptoms more and could more easily avoid being overwhelmed. It has improved our relationship. I can support her better.'*

Remember, giving information is not a one-off exercise, and even experienced carers may need information in an understandable form, especially at times of stress.

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*'Finally when we were offered sessions after the last episode we were able to discuss life plans and identify trigger points etc. At this point the nurse identifies that I could help my son with these plans – this was the first time I felt like I was being proactive in caring for him and that my role was recognised by his doctors and by him.'*

**Confidentiality** – It is important to make the distinction between giving personal information about a person and giving general information about a mental health problem or type of treatment. Help carers understand this distinction and make sure everyone is clear on what information can and cannot be shared.

*'The professional people helping my son have always freely discussed the illness with me. His medication has been explained to me. I have found my son's GP, psychiatrist, CPN, social workers and occupational therapist have always treated my son with compassion, sensitivity and courtesy and this has been much appreciated by myself.'*

**Confidentiality works two ways** - If mental health workers share information, **provided by carers in confidence**, with the person they support, this can have devastating consequences on both carers and those they support'. Make sure that information from carers is handled sensitively.

*'I felt that the private information we gave to the doctors was passed on to our daughter, making her more alienated from us than ever. Made things much worse.'*



## *Further information*

**Carers and Confidentiality - developing effective relationships between practitioners and carers. Mental Welfare Commission for Scotland. Guidance**

[www.mwscot.org.uk/web/FILES/Publications/Carers\\_Confidential.pdf](http://www.mwscot.org.uk/web/FILES/Publications/Carers_Confidential.pdf)

**“It’s their job, it’s my life” report**

[www.supportinmindscotland.org.uk/information-and-support/publications/its-their-job-its-my-life](http://www.supportinmindscotland.org.uk/information-and-support/publications/its-their-job-its-my-life)

**NHS Education for Scotland – Mental Health Work**

[www.nes.scot.nhs.uk/education-and-training/by-theme-initiative/mental-health-and-learning-disabilities.aspx](http://www.nes.scot.nhs.uk/education-and-training/by-theme-initiative/mental-health-and-learning-disabilities.aspx)

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