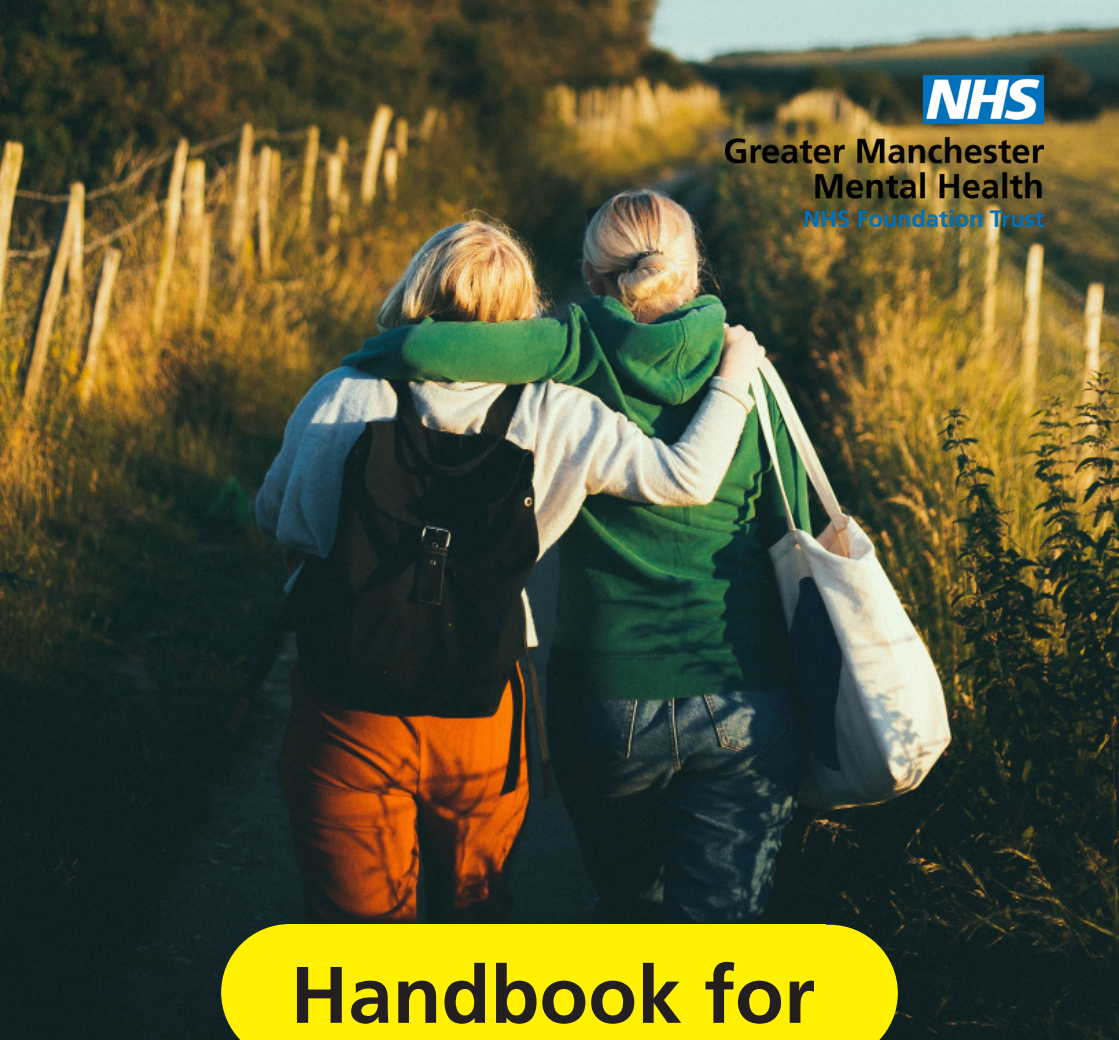




Greater Manchester  
Mental Health  
NHS Foundation Trust



**Handbook for  
Carers, Family and  
Friends**

Because you care



“...Initially, I had a problem when mental health staff referred to me as her ‘carer’. I’m a brother and a friend, first and foremost.

It took a professional working with Sarah and myself for many weeks before we could both understand that my role was also that of a carer. I had to learn to come to terms with the fact that this was a part of my relationship with my sister, but also that it did not define our relationship.

A lot of our friends and family never see the extent of my caring role...when they’ve gone home from family gatherings, they don’t see the emotional support I have to give to her, the encouragement to get her to take her medication or talking her through the evening’s events to reassure her that it went well. Before I realised I was a carer, I never thought about the support I was providing and how it was also having an impact on my own health...”





# I've never really seen myself as a carer

When supporting somebody with their mental health, you might not necessarily be getting involved in physical caring tasks. You may have not heard the term 'carer' directed at you until the person you support was taken on by Mental Health Services. Despite this, getting involved in a number of tasks can mean that you are in a caring role for somebody. This could be:

- ♥ Providing emotional support
- ♥ Encouraging them to access and engage with mental health services
- ♥ Helping them to manage things they might find overwhelming (going to the shops, cooking, helping them get to places)
- ♥ Encouraging them to make their own decisions/to make healthy choices
- ♥ Being there for them during treatment
- ♥ Being an advocate for them

Statistics show that it can take on average 5 years for 'mental health carers' to understand the extent of their caring role on themselves. Mental health issues can influence moods, emotions and behaviour, which can have a significant impact on your relationship.

It's worth saying that there are many positive sides to being a carer too!



A carer can be a family member, friend or even neighbour and somebody of any age. You might be living with the person you support or providing support from a distance. You may find that other people (even your close friends and family) do not understand your role as a carer. It might be useful to talk to somebody you feel comfortable with about the support that you provide or let them see this handbook.

## If it wasn't for my support, they would really be struggling with things

By the time somebody accesses mental health services/support, the person needing support may have been experiencing mental ill health for many years. It can be frustrating as a carer to know they need some help but will not take the steps required to get it. It's important to accept that there are always limits to what you can do to support them.

As friends, mental health professionals or colleagues come and go, carers are often the only constant in the life of the person needing support. You see them when they are well and unwell, know their motivations, aspirations and strengths, as well as their physical and social needs. You most probably know when they are heading for a difficult time before they realise it themselves. It might be useful to prepare for this and have a talk with them at a time whilst they are well. This may help you to talk more openly about things when you notice things changing, particularly around signs that they may be coming unwell again.

A more formal way of doing this could be the person you support developing an Advance Decision.

Advance decisions enable the people to make choices and decisions about their future care whilst they are well, for this to be taken into account in the future, if there is a time when these decisions cannot be made e.g. when they no longer have mental capacity. E.g. the advance decision could be used to inform mental health professionals that they do not



**An Advance Decision will be legally binding, and must be followed by health professionals, if you have made a clear and valid Advance Decision and you have followed the procedures set out in the Mental Capacity Act.**

Mind

want a certain form of treatment/medication, as they did not benefit from it at an earlier time, or that although they may say otherwise when very unwell, they appreciate that informing their partner about their condition/treatment should continue. Ask staff involved for further information and about our Understanding Advance Decisions Course through our Recovery Academy.

Many people who use mental health services find their identity is defined in terms of their diagnosis or associated symptoms. Life story work can help the person maintain or gain a sense of identity, and encourages mental health practitioners to implement the principles of the recovery model, viewing the person as a unique individual and providing a person-centred service. Ask staff involved for further information and about our An Introduction to Life Story Work course through our Recovery Academy.



For more information about what courses we offer, please visit [www.gmmh.nhs.uk/recovery](http://www.gmmh.nhs.uk/recovery)

It can be difficult to separate the mental ill health from the person you support, particularly if their behaviour towards you is upsetting. It's important to take some time for yourself when you can and speak to friends, family or your local carer support services. Our staff will be able to let you know about any carer support groups/forums local to you. It can be beneficial speaking to other carers in a similar situation.

! For more information about carer groups, please visit [www.gmmh.nhs.uk/local-carer-groups](http://www.gmmh.nhs.uk/local-carer-groups)

### Am I doing the right thing?

It can be a struggle knowing what to do for the best when supporting somebody with mental ill health. Unlike a physical illness, mental health can fluctuate and be rather unpredictable. Many mental health carers describe feeling helpless whilst the person they care for goes through experiences alone. It is worth bearing in mind that one in four of us suffers with mental health issues at some time and no one can prevent somebody else from developing a mental health problem.

It can be really empowering for somebody living with a mental health issue to realise that they can do certain things on their own. If possible, speak to them about the support you provide and come to an agreement about the things you can do, as well as things they can do to help the situation. There may be certain situations they feel that they can cope with for themselves.

! For more information about caring for someone [www.mind.org.uk/information-support/helping-someone-else/](http://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/helping-someone-else/)

### Coping Strategies as a carer

'Coping strategies' refer to the specific efforts, both behavioural and psychological, that people employ to endure, tolerate, reduce, or minimise stressful events.

Individuals who tend to respond to situations with the same type of coping strategies have a 'coping style'.

Broadly speaking, there are three coping styles:

#### Engaged

- Actively trying to maintain or regain control
- Trying to change their behaviour: "at loggerheads"
- Trying to take charge of the situation: "Overly involved"

#### Tolerant

- Passively putting up with it at expense of own needs
- Being accepting and self-sacrificing: "Bearing the brunt"
- Shielding them from any harm they may be doing to themselves or others: "Treading on eggshells"

#### Withdrawn

- Withdrawing or establishing independence
- Having some emotional/physical distance: "Looking after number 1"
- Doing something for myself. Escaping with some: "Me time"

There is no right or wrong coping style. Some prefer using one particular style where others may find themselves using a mixture of all three.

## I struggle to understand the illness

### and what they're living with

If you have never experienced mental illness, it can be hard to understand what it can be like. Remember, that as somebody who is there to support them, you are better placed than most to appreciate the extent of the impact it can have. If you can, ask the person you support to explain what they are going through. If they find that too difficult, there are a number of online resources. If working with GMMH, our staff will be able to point you in the direction of some useful information.

The person you care for might not always be able to explain what would help in the moment. Some people find it helpful to set up little systems for communicating – for example, you could make colours stand for different needs, like this:



When someone is unwell, it can sometimes be easier to say 'I'm feeling amber' than to find the words. Different things work for different people – try to find something that works for you both.

Some people will not feel willing or able to tell you when their mood has changed and what they need. This can make it hard for you and it's understandable if you sometimes get things wrong. Over time, you might find that you can interpret how they are feeling and what they need from their expressions and behaviour.

This extract has been reprinted from Mind's resource 'How to cope when supporting someone else' © 2020. You can read this information in full at [mind.org.uk](http://mind.org.uk)

## Caring and confidentiality

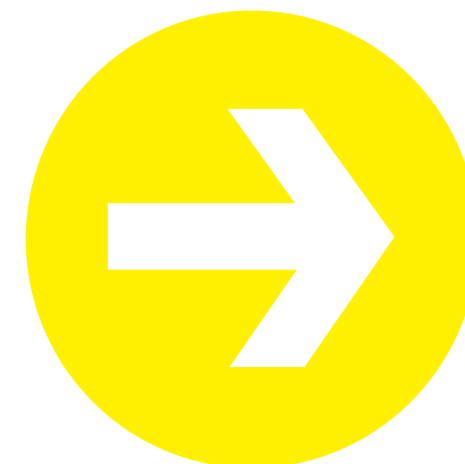
The sharing of information between carers and mental health services is vital to effective care and treatment. At times, a professional cannot pass on certain information to you if the person accessing services does not want them to. They need to give consent for this to happen. This can be frustrating because as a carer, you will see the person when they are well and unwell, know their motivations, aspirations and strengths.

Even without the consent of the service user, you should expect to be able to communicate with mental health staff, share important information and receive certain information yourself about:

- ♥ Health problems, treatments and medications
- ♥ How to cope with stressful situations
- ♥ What help and support is available for you
- ♥ Who to contact to express concerns, especially in an emergency or 'out of hours'
- ♥ Why certain information cannot be shared with you

**For further information, please speak to staff and request a copy of our 'Carer and Confidentiality Guide'.**

When caring for somebody, it can be difficult to prioritise yourself. Remember that your mental health and wellbeing are equally important to look after. (See above on 'coping styles').



## **I'm worried about what other people think**

A number of mental health carers describe caring for a family member or friend as having "...the same stigma as having the diagnosis myself..." Stigma around mental health issues can be upsetting and mean you have less people than you would like to understand the situation and be able to better support you.

## **You make a great team.**

## **But you're not on your own.**

If you are a carer, family member or friend of somebody accessing GMMH Services, please let a member of our staff know. We have a dedicated Carer Lead and a number of useful resources available to you.

For information about GMMH services, information around local carers support and signposting, please email [\*\*carers@gmmh.nhs.uk\*\*](mailto:carers@gmmh.nhs.uk)

For a wealth of resources on mental health and caring:

 [\*\*www.mind.org.uk\*\*](http://www.mind.org.uk)

If worried about somebody you know:

 [\*\*www.mentalhealth.org.uk\*\*](http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk)

 [\*\*www.samaritans.org\*\*](http://www.samaritans.org)

 [\*\*www.hubofhope.co.uk\*\*](http://www.hubofhope.co.uk)