

# Couples who care for an adult who lives with a mental illness - Relationship tips

## Who is this information for?

This information is for couples who care for a relative who is an adult who lives with mental illness in England.

## What is this information about?

Caring for a relative who lives with mental illness can be rewarding. It can give you peace of mind that they have the right treatment and support in place.

But it can be challenging too. And if you are in a relationship, it can have an impact on you and your partner.

Below are some ideas for how you and your partner can support each other and strengthen your relationship.

## Acknowledgement

This information is inspired by Rosie Hunt's doctorate study, 'Collaboration, compassion and creativity: Learning from parents' experience how mental health professionals can better support couples whose adult child experiences mental health difficulties.'<sup>1</sup>

Many thanks to Rosemary for her hard work and for sharing her research with us.

## Key word

We use the words '**your relative**' to mean the adult that you care for who lives with mental illness.

### This factsheet covers:

1. [How can we acknowledge tension within our relationship?](#)
2. [How can we best listen to each other's point of view?](#)
3. [How can we get support to communicate with each other?](#)
4. [How can we invest in our relationship?](#)
5. [How can we take time out as a couple?](#)
6. [How can I take care of my own mental health?](#)

### **1. How can we acknowledge tension within our relationship?**

Supporting your relative can sometimes be challenging. So, it can be normal for you and your partner to experience feelings that are complex, uncomfortable, and overwhelming.

There is no single response for how to cope. But differing approaches and feelings towards a situation could cause tension in your relationship.

For example, having a disagreement about how to support your relative's mental health needs can be upsetting. Or money issues linked to care needs can be stressful.

If things like money, housing, or welfare benefits issues are causing tension in your relationship it can help to get expert advice. See our [Useful contacts](#) sections at the end of this factsheet for helpful organisations.

You can acknowledge tensions by talking openly about you are feeling. This can help you to work towards solutions which work for both of you.

### **How can we prepare to talk openly about how we are feeling?**

Before starting a conversation with your partner, it may be useful to think about the following:

- Are you in a suitable place to talk?
- How much time do you need to have the conversation?
- What specific things do you want to talk about?
- Is there anything you can do to avoid being disturbed?
- Are you mentally able to cope with the conversation at this time?
- Is your partner mentally able to cope with this information at this time?
- Is anyone else needed to support you or your partner? And if so, are they available?
- Do we you need any rules or boundaries? Like if one of you is talking, you agree the other one listens and doesn't interrupt?

## 2. How can we best listen to each other's point of view?

Key to good communication and understanding is:

- giving each other time to share thoughts and feelings, and
- listening to each others points of view.

During a conversation it may help to.

- Repeat your partner's words back to them in your own words. This shows that you are listening. Repeating information can also make sure that you have understood them properly.
- Acknowledge concerns without judgement.
- Try to stay calm and empathetic.
- Stay on topic.
- Avoid blaming language like 'you never', 'you should' or 'it's your fault.'
- It can help to use 'I think' and 'I feel' statements when you share your point of view.
- Be accountable for your actions. For example, if you say or do something unhelpful in the heat of the moment you could say you are sorry.

## 3. How can we get support to communicate with each other?

Learning how to effectively communicate together as a couple might be challenging. A relationship counsellor may be able to help you with this.

To get couples counselling you can:

- talk to your GP – you might be able to get relationship counselling in some areas on the NHS,
- find a private therapist – see below,
- you may be able to get counselling from charities such as Relate for a fee or free through a national partnership. [www.relate.org.uk](http://www.relate.org.uk). You can find out more about free counselling by searching 'relate national partnerships' on the internet.

### How do I find a private therapist?

We always advise that you find a therapist who is a member of a professional body. This means that they will meet certain standards, have a complaints procedure and follow a code of ethics. You can search for private therapists in your local area on the following websites:

- **British Association of Counsellors and Psychotherapists:** [www.bacp.co.uk/search/Therapists](http://www.bacp.co.uk/search/Therapists)
- **UK Council for Psychotherapy:** [www.psychotherapy.org.uk](http://www.psychotherapy.org.uk)

- **The National Counselling and Psychotherapy Society:** <https://nationalcounsellingociety.org>
- **Counselling Directory:** [www.counselling-directory.org.uk](http://www.counselling-directory.org.uk). This is not a professional body. Counsellors can be listed on there if they meet thorough approvals requirements. You can read more about the approvals policy here: [www.counselling-directory.org.uk/verifiedseal.html](http://www.counselling-directory.org.uk/verifiedseal.html)

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#### 4. How can we invest in our relationship?

Good relationships can be helpful to our mental and physical health and wellbeing.

If you care for a relative who lives with mental illness, the quality of your relationship as a couple can be extra important.

It can help to invest in your relationship by trying to do the following things.

- Maintain warmth, reassurance, and respect with your partner.
- Support each other in difficult times.
- Avoid making sudden decisions or comments if things aren't going well.
- Make sure you [look after your own wellbeing](#), so you're able to support your partner too.
- [Take time out as a couple](#).
- Agree when each person can have their own time, and set boundaries if you need to.
- Listen to each other and if you can't agree on something, try to compromise.
- Agree to be honest and open with one another about thoughts and feelings and to talk issues through.
- When you're talking or spending time with each other, being present by avoiding distractions like your mobile phone.

If you experience domestic abuse you can contact the following organisation:

##### **Domestic Abuse helpline**

The Freephone 24 Hour National Helpline for people experiencing domestic abuse.

**Phone:** 0808 2000 247

**Website:** [www.nationaldahelpline.org.uk](http://www.nationaldahelpline.org.uk)

## 5. How can we take time out as a couple?

You can try to have quality time with your partner away from your relative. This might include going for a walk, doing a shared hobby, or a short break away.

You could ask family or friends if they can care for your relative while you take a break.

You may find it useful to plan time into your diaries to make sure time together happens.

It's up to you how you best use this time and what you talk about during it.

You might find it useful to:

- set a boundary about what you talk about. You might use the time to switch off from your relative and your caring responsibilities, and not talk about them, or
- write worries down and place them in a physical box, and leave it at home.

Or you might use the time to share your thoughts and emotions about your relative and your caring responsibilities. Especially if you have little time otherwise to do this as a couple.

It's your choice what you use this time for.

### How can we get a low cost short break?

The charity Carefree offer low cost, short breaks for unpaid carers: <https://carefreespace.org>.

You can contact our Rethink Advice and Information Service and we might be able to refer you for Carefree services:

- **By phone:** Monday to Friday 9.30am - 4pm, excluding bank holidays on 0808 801 0525, or
- **By webchat:** Monday to Friday, 10.00am – 1pm, excluding bank holidays. Look out for the webchat icon in bottom, right-hand corner of the screen at [www.rethink.org](http://www.rethink.org)

### How can we get respite care for our relative?

Respite means that you get a short break from your caring responsibilities, but your child still gets the care they need.

A short break may be:

- regular breaks, such as monthly breaks, so that you have time to focus on your own wellbeing and your relationship, or
- it may be less regular support, such as time for a short holiday with your partner.

To get respite care you can contact your local authority and ask for a carer's assessment.

You can find more information about:

- Respite care – Breaks for carers, and
- Carer's assessments – Under the Care Act 2014

at [www.rethink.org](http://www.rethink.org). Or call our General Enquiries team on 0121 522 7007 and ask them to send you a copy of our factsheet.

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## **6. How can I take care of my own mental health?**

Supporting someone with mental illness can be stressful. It is important to take care of your own mental health too.

### **What are support groups?**

Support groups are where people with similar issues share experiences with each other and get mutual support. Support groups can be online or in person.

You can consider joining a local carers service or support group for parents or carers of people with mental illness. You could do this with your partner or on your own.

You may not consider yourself to be a carer. But you are if you support someone with mental illness and provide emotional or practical support to them. You may benefit from joining a support group.

You can find groups at the following links or by searching online:

- **Rethink Mental Illness:** [www.rethink.org/help-in-your-area/support-groups](http://www.rethink.org/help-in-your-area/support-groups)
- **Local Minds:** [www.mind.org.uk/about-us/local-minds](http://www.mind.org.uk/about-us/local-minds)
- **Carers UK:** support where you live, and, [www.carersuk.org/help-and-advice/support-where-you-live](http://www.carersuk.org/help-and-advice/support-where-you-live) online meets ups: [www.carersuk.org/help-and-advice/your-health-and-wellbeing/online-meetups](http://www.carersuk.org/help-and-advice/your-health-and-wellbeing/online-meetups) and
- **Carers Trust:** <https://carers.org/search/network-partners>

## How can I get counselling?

You might find it helpful to talk to a counsellor to deal with any stress or challenges away from your partner.

There are lots of different ways to access counselling.

You can:

- contact your local NHS talking therapies service directly: [www.nhs.uk/service-search/mental-health/find-an-NHS-talking-therapies-service](http://www.nhs.uk/service-search/mental-health/find-an-NHS-talking-therapies-service),
- ask for a referral through your GP,
- contact a private counsellor,
- search for a charity providing free or low cost therapy,
- contact your employee assistance programme, if your employer has one, or
- contact student services, if you are a student.

You can find more information about '**Talking therapies**' at [www.rethink.org](http://www.rethink.org). Or call our General Enquiries team on 0121 522 7007 and ask them to send you a copy of our factsheet.

## What support can my GP give me?

Caring for someone with a mental health problem can be challenging. If it is affecting your mental health to the extent that it is affecting your day-to-day life, you can see your GP.

They can offer you advice and treatment.

You can find more information about '**GPs and your mental health**' at [www.rethink.org](http://www.rethink.org). Or call our General Enquiries team on 0121 522 7007 and ask them to send you a copy of our factsheet.

## How can I maintain healthy lifestyle behaviours?

The following can help you to maintain healthy lifestyle behaviours and manage stress:

You can:

- **Eat healthy foods and have a balanced diet.** You can get more information here: [www.nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well](http://www.nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well)
- **Keep physically active.** Exercise can help to reduce stress and anxiety. You can get more information here: [www.rethink.org/advice-and-information/living-with-mental-illness/information-on-wellbeing-physical-health-bame-lgbtplus-and-studying-and-mental-health/physical-activity-and-mental-health](http://www.rethink.org/advice-and-information/living-with-mental-illness/information-on-wellbeing-physical-health-bame-lgbtplus-and-studying-and-mental-health/physical-activity-and-mental-health)
- **Choose healthier drinks and make sure you're hydrated.** You can get more information here: [www.nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well/food-guidelines-and-food-labels/water-drinks-nutrition](http://www.nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well/food-guidelines-and-food-labels/water-drinks-nutrition)

- **Have enough sleep.** You can get more information here: [www.rethink.org/advice-and-information/living-with-mental-illness/wellbeing-physical-health/how-can-i-improve-my-sleep](http://www.rethink.org/advice-and-information/living-with-mental-illness/wellbeing-physical-health/how-can-i-improve-my-sleep)
- **Avoiding alcohol, drinking only moderately, or cutting down.** You can get more information here: [www.rethink.org/advice-and-information/about-mental-illness/learn-more-about-conditions/drugs-alcohol-and-mental-health](http://www.rethink.org/advice-and-information/about-mental-illness/learn-more-about-conditions/drugs-alcohol-and-mental-health)
- **Avoiding smoking or cutting down.** You can get more information here: [www.rethink.org/advice-and-information/living-with-mental-illness/information-on-wellbeing-physical-health-bame-lgbtplus-and-studying-and-mental-health/smoking-and-mental-health](http://www.rethink.org/advice-and-information/living-with-mental-illness/information-on-wellbeing-physical-health-bame-lgbtplus-and-studying-and-mental-health/smoking-and-mental-health)
- **Have a daily routine.** Keeping a routine can help you to keep your mind occupied and focused on healthy thoughts and activities.
- **Learn ways to relax.** Such as listening to meditation CDs or relaxing music. You can find free meditation videos on websites like YouTube.
- **Practise mindfulness and meditation.** You can get more information here: [www.mindful.org/meditation/mindfulness-getting-started](http://www.mindful.org/meditation/mindfulness-getting-started)
- **Spend time with friends and family**
- **Make time for yourself**

Taking time to take care of mental health can also improve your physical health.

You can find more information about:

- **Stress – How to cope**
- **Supporting someone with a mental illness**

at [www.rethink.org](http://www.rethink.org). Or call our General Enquiries Team on 0121 522 7007 and ask them to send you a copy of our factsheet.

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You can find more information about:

- Confidentiality, information and your loved one – For loved ones of people living with mental illness
- Getting help for someone in a mental health crisis
- Going into hospital – For carers, friends, and relatives
- Planning for the future – Your relative's care and support
- Responding to unusual behaviour linked to mental illness
- Suicidal thoughts – How to support someone

at [www.rethink.org](http://www.rethink.org). Or call our General Enquiries Team on 0121 522 7007 and ask them to send you a copy of our factsheet.

## Further Reading

## Carers organisations

### Carers Trust

Is a charity who work to transform the lives of unpaid carers through collaboration, influence, evidence and innovation. You can find carer services near you on their website.

**Phone:** 0300 772 9600

**Address:** Unit 101 164–180 Union Street London SE1 0LH

**Email:** [info@carers.org](mailto:info@carers.org)

**Website:** <https://carers.org>

### Carers UK

Their website and helpline provide information and advice on areas such as carers' assessments and services available for carers.

**Phone:** 0808 808 7777

**Email:** [advice@carersuk.org](mailto:advice@carersuk.org)

**Website:** [www.carersuk.org](http://www.carersuk.org)

## Relationship mediation

### Relate

Counselling, support and information for all relationships. Relate offer message, webcam, and telephone counselling either to individuals or couples or families.

**Phone:** 0300 100 1234

**Website:** [www.relate.org.uk](http://www.relate.org.uk)

## Money, welfare benefits and debt advice

### National Debtline

Provide free, independent and confidential advice about debt. You can contact them over the phone, by email, letter or webchat.

**Phone:** 0808 808 4000

**Website:** [www.nationaldebtline.org](http://www.nationaldebtline.org)

### StepChange

One of the UK's leading debt charity. They provide free and effective debt advice, and practical solutions, to help transform the lives of those struggling with the stress and worry of problem debt.

**Phone:** 0800 138 1111

**Website:** [www.stepchange.org](http://www.stepchange.org)

**The Money Advice Service**  
Free and impartial advice about money issues.

**Phone:** 0800 138 7777  
**Website:** [www.moneyadviceservice.org.uk/en](http://www.moneyadviceservice.org.uk/en)

You can find information on the **Mental Health and Money Advice** website: [www.mentalhealthandmoneyadvice.org](http://www.mentalhealthandmoneyadvice.org) on:

- **What benefits are available for mental health carers?**
- **What are my options for dealing with debt?**
- **Can someone else manage my money for me?** Advice on managing your relative's money

You can search for local debt and welfare benefits advisers on the following website: <https://advicefinder.turn2us.org.uk>. Select 'Debt' from the drop-down menu and pop in your postcode.

### **Housing advice**

#### **Shelter**

The leading housing charity in the UK. They offer advice and help on all aspects of housing, including homelessness and poor housing through their online advice service and free phone telephone advice line. They can also direct you towards local housing organisations in your area.

**Advice line:** 0808 800 4444  
**Website:** <https://england.shelter.org.uk>

### **The Citizens Advice Service**

Helps people resolve their legal, money and other problems by providing free, independent and confidential advice.

**Phone:** 03444 111 444  
**Website:** [www.citizensadvice.org.uk](http://www.citizensadvice.org.uk)

You can also search for local housing advice on the following website. Choose 'Housing' from the drop-down menu and put in your postcode: <https://advicefinder.turn2us.org.uk>

## **Broken links?**

All links to other pages on our website, and other websites, worked when we last reviewed this page. If you notice that any links no longer work, you can help us by emailing us at [feedback@rethink.org](mailto:feedback@rethink.org) and we will fix them. Many thanks.

## **Incorrect information?**

All the information in this factsheet was correct, to the best of our knowledge, when we published it. If you think any information is incorrect you can help us by emailing us at [feedback@rethink.org](mailto:feedback@rethink.org). Many thanks.

## **References**

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<sup>1</sup> Hunt, Rosie. *Collaboration, Compassion and Creativity: Learning from parents' experience how mental health professionals can better support couples whose adult child experiences mental health difficulties*. Unpublished thesis submitted to the University of Manchester. 2023. Page 123.

This factsheet is available in large print.

## Rethink Mental Illness Advice Service

**Phone 0808 801 0525**

**Monday to Friday, 9:30am to 4pm  
(excluding bank holidays)**

Email a [\[redacted\]](#)

### Did this help?

We'd love to know if this information helped you

**Drop us a line at:** [feedback@rethink.org](mailto:feedback@rethink.org)

**or write to us at Rethink Mental Illness:**

RAIS  
PO Box 18252  
Solihull  
B91 9BA

**or call us on** 0808 801 0525

We're open 9:30am to 4pm

Monday to Friday (excluding bank holidays)



**Equality, rights, fair treatment, and the maximum quality of life for all those severely affected by mental illness.**

For further information on Rethink Mental Illness Phone 0121 522 7007  
Email [info@rethink.org](mailto:info@rethink.org)



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