

What Works for Men in a Caring Role?

Report from a one-day event held in North East Scotland on the issues facing Male Carers.

“Carers look after family, partners or friends in need of help because they are ill, frail or have a disability. The care they provide is unpaid.”

Carers UK

January 2007



VSA
* INVITATION *

MALE CARERS EVENT

TUESDAY 10th OCTOBER 2006 ~ 10AM - 3PM
SALVATION ARMY HALL, WINDMILL STREET, PETERHEAD

Morning Session - ***'What are the issues facing Male Carers?'***

Ross Stoker is the NEW MALE CARERS WORKER for Aberdeenshire and will lead a discussion on the issues facing male carers. Ross's post has been funded by the Scottish Executive to investigate the issues and roles of male carers in Aberdeenshire.

(Lunch supplied by 'The Albert Hotel')

Afternoon Session - ***Looking at Stress, the causes, the symptoms and ways of coping***

Trainer: Euan McCormack
Mental Health Improvement Advisor, NHS Grampian

~ Call Moira for more information or to reserve your place ~

Organiser

Moira Steinbach - Carers Support Worker,
VSA North East Aberdeenshire

Facilitators

Charles Hendry – Male Carers Worker, Gordon Rural Action
Euan McCormack – Mental Health Improvement Advisor, NHS
Grampian
Sean McDonald – Service Co-ordinator, Crossroads
Ross Stoker – Male Carers Development Worker, VSA

Thanks

Thanks go to Moira, Janice and Phyllis from VSA's North East Carers Centres for all their hard work in making the day a success. Thanks also go to all the facilitators, to the Salvation Army and to The Albert Hotel, Peterhead (for providing lunch). And finally, special thanks go to all the male carers who took the time out from their busy lives to actively participate in the day.

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Introduction

The third annual Male Carers Event was held at the Salvation Army Hall in Peterhead on Tuesday 10th October 2006 from 10am to 3pm. The aim of the day was to provide male carers from the North Aberdeenshire area with an opportunity to meet for a day of discussion, good company and to share experiences and ideas. The day was split into two parts with a lunch break in the middle. The event was attended by 24 men throughout the day, who all contributed to the discussion.

The day kicked-off with introductory words from Moira and Ross. Ross explained that his post has been funded by the Scottish Executive specifically to explore male carer awareness, how and why male carers sought support for their caring role, and the needs of male carers. This information would be used to develop future services for male carers in the Aberdeenshire area. Any issues arising from the event may play an important part in shaping local service provision and, potentially, national policy.

The morning session took the form of discussion groups, each with a facilitator. A pre-prepared set of questions encouraged the men to discuss a wide range of relevant issues which focussed around what it is like to be a man in a caring role. The results of these discussion groups are to be found in the body of this report. Once everyone got going, it was generally agreed that debate could have carried on all day!

After a break for soup, sandwiches and more discussion, the afternoon session began with a presentation from Euan McCormack exploring stress and methods to cope with stress on a personal level. It came as no surprise that most of the carers present acknowledged that they had experienced most, and in many cases all, of the emotional, behavioural and physical symptoms of stress. The presentation led to a lively debate about extra stress caused by the difficulties encountered by carers when dealing with agencies and professionals. Problems were discussed in relation to all aspects of service provision e.g. Health, General Practitioners, Welfare Benefits, Social Work, Respite, etc.

One very clear message to be taken from the day is that male carers experience many similar difficulties. They are keen to voice their opinions but feel that they are not being listened to. There are many issues which male carers strongly believe need to be addressed in order to support them in their caring role. Whilst it can be difficult to get men to come together in the first place, when they do, they have a great deal to contribute to the emerging debate surrounding male carers' needs.

By all accounts, everyone who came along felt they had gained something and enjoyed themselves. One of the most common responses has been "When's the next one?"

The Discussion Groups

After the initial introductions at the start of the event, the men formed four discussion groups. The groups each consisted of four or five carers and one facilitator. A set of 17 questions was provided to encourage discussion.

Following the discussion groups (which ran beyond the scheduled amount of time and could have continued for much longer!) the men came back together to discuss some of the main issues that were being raised.

Core issues –

- Contrast between traditional male role and caring role
- Importance of support networks and good respite services
- Financial implications of caring
- Emotional impact of caring
- How to deal with unhelpful professional services
- What actually helps men in a caring role
- What male carers need

The statements and comments reflect the experiences and beliefs of the men themselves. The emphasis was not to attempt to provide solutions or “fix” problems at the event. The focus was simply on *listening* to the men. Carers have identified this as something that they need but rarely happens. Every effort has been made to display the exact words of the carers as they were recorded on the day. In some instances, it has been necessary to add a few words to clarify terms which are in common usage amongst carers but may not be so obvious to the wider public (e.g. Carer’s Allowance)

Due to time limitations and enthusiastic discussion, some of the groups were unable to cover some of the questions towards the end of the list. This, along with a number of identical responses, is reflected in fewer comments for some of those questions.

Format of report

The responses are grouped in boxes below each question. There is no order of priority to the comments. All of the carers’ views are considered to be of equal value and importance.

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Section A – Male Carers’ Needs – how are men different?

1 - Do you agree that men in the caring role have some specific needs? If so, what are they?

- caring is perceived as a female role
- men in a caring role do not get respect from wider society – men traditionally earn money
- time off work = reduced income
- big changes – carer role is often very different from anything done before
- impact on self esteem
- learning curve greater because many women already have experience of a caring role
- discrimination experienced as male carer
- stigma - “I’m paying taxes for you!” one carer was told

2 - Is there a need for a “Male Carers Support Worker”?

- there is a need
- men have to have a man to talk to
- never had one so don’t know
- needs to be somebody taking these issues forward
- no (see next question)

3 - What difference should it make to have a man in the post of male carers support worker and what would you expect from him?

- no difference
- it’s down to their nature & personality rather than their gender
- some males feel more comfortable talking to other males
- I feel that a male would understand male carers’ needs better
- it’s just nice to be able to speak to another man
- having the option of male *and* female support workers for different issues is a good thing
- doesn’t need to be a man – just must be able to do something!

4 - What is the hardest thing about being a carer *and* being male?

- understanding female personal needs e.g. personal clothing, shopping for them
- female medical/biological issues
- having patience
- being or feeling useless, unable to help i.e. changing wife at swimming baths
- female nurses/care workers can lead to experiences of carer exclusion
- isolated during the night
- dealing with people's perceptions
- need to escape!
- men are different, tend to isolate to relax/de-stress not sit and talk about it – not an option if you're a carer (expanded answer in section D)
- men in caring role seen as "scrounging off the social"

5 - Are there any ways in which being a man is an advantage in the caring role?

- assertiveness
- physical strength for manual handling
- fast and functional approach to problem solving
- men get to the point!
- cared-for may feel more confident going out and about with a male (from a security point of view)
- being employed – financial ways to help to pay for care
- stoic (we just get on with it!)
- sometimes a more straightforward approach to form-filling, shopping, etc.
- it seems to help when dealing with authorities

Section B - Caring Issues – what is caring like for you?

6 - What changed when you became a carer?

- life-plans
- had to give up work
- loss of concentration
- became depressed
- found it difficult coping on my own
- social life "out the window"
- lack of support
- lack of help
- loss of freedom
- loss of income
- completely different priorities

7 - How did you come to identify yourself as a carer?

- slow process
- “creeps up on you”
- when I started to do things for myself and for my loved-one
- see it as a duty rather than as a “Carer”
- increasing % of life becomes caring/duty
- staying at home to look after a loved one
- carer label taken on from involvement with health and social work agencies
- told about being a “carer” by professionals

8 - What helps you to cope with the pressures of caring? (i.e. family, respite, Carer’s Allowance, going to the pub, social events, playing sports, etc.)

- friends
- family
- respite, but
 - access to services is not good and available dates are often unhelpful
 - cared for doesn’t like/can’t deal with strangers so respite not an option
 - why can’t we be supported to go on holiday together instead of being separated?
- social contact
- information & support from Moira (VSA),
- praise/acknowledgement - “I need to know when I’m doing something right”
- “downtime”
- car insurance as “carer” is actually a better deal
- someone just to come in for a couple of hours a day to let you out
- money “oils wheels”
- Direct Payments are brilliant - you can hire who you want!

9 - What are the central issues/concerns for you as a carer?

- well-being of partner/well-being of self (secondary)
- finances – can't work, can't save because you lose benefits
- Carer's Allowance (not very much and reduces or is removed if on other benefits/pension)
- lack of training
- lack of respite
- lack of care workers
- coping – "Sometimes when I get in the car, I just want to keep driving and not come back"
- cost of care is a real concern (care homes, etc.)
- information is not freely available - "Sometimes I think the local authority keep it quiet in case we find out!"
- forms – too long, repetitive, need special language, trick questions
- rights not being upheld
- why can't we keep the same care workers/social workers over time?

10 - What new skills did you need to learn when you became a carer?

- self-education
- cooking/domestic
- patience
- knowledge of Benefits system
- became a good listener
- learned to query/investigate
- learned who to turn to for help
- I became a ninja! (one carer took up martial arts)

11 - What advice would you offer to new carers?

- ask plenty & don't take 'no' for an answer
- try to get as much help as possible
- get ready for guilt
- need to find something to take your mind off
- forget your previous lifestyle
- need to find time to relax
- be cheerful
- patience and love

12 - Are you aware of the “Reclaim the Name” campaign? It has been suggested that people who care as a job and get paid should be referred to as “Care Workers” and not carers. This is intended to make the identity of carers clearer for carers themselves, the media and the general public. Is this helpful?

- not heard of this, but good idea
- good idea
- change of name not enough, must be an increase in money
- yes, it's very helpful
- yes, it can be confusing
- will help identify carers

Section C - The Future – what works for men?

13 - The Robert Gordon University is currently seeking the views of service-users in shaping the courses that train new Social Workers. What do Social Work students need to know about issues facing male carers?

- understanding male roles
- listen to what service-users are saying
- more “hands-on” work i.e. spending time with carers in their own homes
- speak to carers
- listen to carers
- Social Workers in Training (SWITs) should *do* the actual care work – they need to understand the practicalities to be able to be of any real use – e.g. with realistic care plans
- be a bit more like Occupational Therapists in understanding the practicalities of the care role

14 - How can we make carer support groups more relevant to men?

- more meetings like this one
- more issues relating to men only
- provide a social escape
- include health issues
- provide opportunity to share experiences with others for their benefit
- provide knowledge
- provide food!
- take into account difficulties of arranging cover for carers to attend groups

15 - Do men's groups need to be arranged differently to traditional carers' groups? How can carer support groups better meet the needs of male carers?

- male carers want to speak to other males
- men want representation

16 - How do we get more male carers involved?

- publicity! – a lot of males don't know about these meetings or realise that they are "carers"
- arrange cover for meetings
- by helping men to identify that they have a caring role

17 – Some research appears to show that male carers in rural locations are more likely to participate in events like this and make use of supports on offer. Any ideas why this might be?

- perhaps feeling isolated
- want company to come together to share ideas
- more likely to meet, speak to one another
- more community minded
- you always meet someone you know
- folk in the city already get plenty of services

Section D - Other key points raised (paraphrased)

Communication – sometimes the problem is not too little communication but too much! It can be confusing and overwhelming when so many different professionals and agencies are involved. It's about getting the right information at the right time.

Frequent changes - Why can't we have the same professionals, care workers, care managers for a reasonable amount of time? Changing faces, unpredictability and unfamiliarity increase stress and reduce quality of service.

Health services – Discussion of unhelpful system employed by local GPs. Chronic local shortage of GPs. No longer possible to have a named doctor who "knows" your situation. Appointments are either offered same day (if you call at just the right time!) or weeks away. This does not meet the health needs of carers or cared-for. Some discussion of current costly practice of flying GPs in from London or further away to cover North Aberdeenshire.

Carers are not a priority - Discussion about experiences of dealing with professionals (especially Social Workers) and their perceived reluctance to actually listen to and appreciate the needs of carers. Often it seems (several examples of anecdotal evidence offered) that other groups receive priority treatment/funding.

Men & de-stressing – (expansion of point made in question 4) Men seem to need something 'different'. In the experience of the men present, it was felt that many women de-stress by calling a friend or talking through problems. Men often need to isolate themselves and be on their own for a bit but this is not always possible when you're a carer.

Flexible working - Discussion of new flexi-time legislation intended to help carers. Carer response - "Who will pay for me to go to work?" Caring, in many situations, is a 24/7 commitment. It's simply not affordable to pay for care workers so that the carer can go to work. It was agreed this may be most helpful for those carers who;

- a) earn a lot, or
- b) have minimal care duties.

Ask the family – One carer was advised that, as he had family who lived locally, they should be assisting with his caring responsibilities. "My family have family of their own and jobs too. I don't expect them to help me with my obligations when the state should be providing the support." Whilst it was agreed that family support can be invaluable, it is not always the case that family members are willing or able to take on the caring role. It was felt that social services did not always take account of this.

Section E – Summary & Information

It is not the intention of this report to attempt to analyse the results of the event at this stage. Hopefully these responses and comments provide some food for thought and further discussion. The main objective is to provide a record of the day which raises awareness of the issues facing male carers and how this group of men experience their caring role. Whilst all the standard copyright restrictions apply, please feel free to distribute, copy or use this report in any way that highlights the issues relevant to male carers.

Feedback from participants at this event strongly indicates that it can be greatly beneficial for carers just to know that they are not alone.

What happens now?

I would be interested in hearing from anyone with a view on the contents of this paper or on male carers' issues in general. Please get in touch if you would like to be added to my mailing list or need further copies of this report.

Similar events are going to be organised in all areas of Aberdeenshire. If you or the organisation you represent would be interested in attending and/or facilitating one of these events I would be delighted to hear from you.

Whilst my remit is specifically for Aberdeenshire, my recently appointed colleague, Chris Sojka, is providing male carer support services within Aberdeen City.

Chris and I can be reached at the Belmont Street Carers Centre or by any of the means below.

Ross Stoker:

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Mobile - 07802 689758

Email - ross.stoker@vsa.org.uk

Chris Sojka:

Carers Centre - 01224 646677

Young Carers Centre - 01224 625009

Mobile - 07889 088355

Email - chris.sojka@vsa.org.uk

Thank you for taking the time to read this report.

-NOTES-

List of Carers Support Services across Aberdeen City and Shire

ABERDEEN CITY

VSA Carers Centre
24 -28 Belmont Street,
Aberdeen, AB10 1JH
01224 646677
carers.info@vsa.org.uk

VSA Carers Support (Mental Health)
Clerkseat Building,
Royal Cornhill Hospital, **Aberdeen**,
AB25 2ZH 01224 557868
carers-project@btconnect.com

VSA Young Carers
82 King Street,
Aberdeen. AB24 5BA
01224 625009
mary.drever@vsa.org.uk

NORTH ABERDEENSHIRE

VSA Carers Centre
Northwest Aberdeenshire
Carers Centre
01779 490894
project@buchan.carers.net

VSA Carers Centre
19 Seaforth Street,
Fraserburgh, AB43 9BD
01346 510111
project@buchan.carers.net

VSA Carers Centre
5 North Street,
Peterhead, AB42 1JS
01779 490894
project@buchan.carers.net

CENTRAL ABERDEENSHIRE

Gordon Rural Action (GRA)

Carers/Young Carers Support
15a High Street,
Inverurie, AB51 3QA
01467 625277
carerssupport@gordonrural.org.uk

Carers/Young Carers Support
55 Gordon Street,
Huntly, AB54 8EQ
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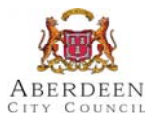
Male Carers Support
55 Gordon Street,
Huntly, AB54 8EQ
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