

## The Ever Changing Challenges of a CarerLinks Carer Advisor

By Fleur Roberts – Carer Advisor – May 2020



The past few weeks have seen unprecedented circumstances across the whole of the UK and Europe due to the Coronavirus. Life as we know it has changed beyond belief. Self-isolation, limited contact with families and no social activities to attend. This has put a huge pressure on everyone but in particular those who were already at breaking point. Those being carers.

Being a carer can be draining and isolating at the best of times. People who are unpaid carers come to our CarerLinks service for help, advice and to make their role as a carer 'as best it can be'.

Given the current circumstances, our role as CarerLinks Carer Advisors has had to change.

Gone are all the activities we could signpost to, such as the activities/groups at Age UK for the elderly or Bright Memories for those with Dementia. Gone are the parent carer coffee mornings that parents with SEN children looked forward to every week to vent and get advice off other parents in similar situations. Gone are the Men in Sheds project that gave men with dementia camaraderie and a purpose to their lives. Gone are the luncheons provided by local community centres across the land for carers and their loved ones, which provided much needed companionship.

A huge proportion of carers relied upon these services as a routine to their lives, giving them much needed interaction with other carers. They also provided a break from their loved one, thus playing an important part in their mental health. For carers, the next few weeks seem to be dark, long and lonely with self-isolating and no family members able to pop in or to bring shopping.

Here is where Carer Advisors like myself step in. My team and I have been able to link into our communities to see what has changed in order to provide support to carers. We have the ability to tap into our established contact links in the wider community to see how services they are offering have adapted to the current situation. Take Age UK; they are delivering shopping to those who cannot leave their loved ones to go shopping for essentials. We can advise carers of that information and contact Age UK on their behalf. Local communities are coming together to help ensure those vulnerable or at risk do not go without, we are able to pull all this new information together to then pass onto carer's, depending on which area they

live in. Prescription deliveries; how do carer's who are self-isolating get their prescriptions? Again, this is something we can help with knowing our local communities.

For the carer's husband who went into a care home for respite and is now stuck, due to an outbreak of the virus, she cannot see him or take him home; who is going to foot the bill for this additional stay? Knowing whom to contact at Citizens Advice Bureau for financial help and support on this matter and many more issues carers face is critical. The changed details on Food Banks to ensure families can eat. For the technically sound carer, advising of Apps that can link families together so they can 'see' their family and friends.

Most importantly, the relationships we have built with carers mean that they can keep in touch with us via the telephone. We have set up FaceTime as some carers like to have that face-to-face contact. For our internal use, we have collated a spreadsheet of all our carers so we know who are the priority, if therefore, myself or my colleague went off sick or into self-isolation, one of us could continue with the relationship with the carer.

We are not mental health practitioners, nor have we received professional training in this area, but being able to listen, empathise and do our best to help carers and their loved ones get through this crisis and all the restrictions, is one of the most difficult challenges we will face.

Carers are at their wits end, struggling mentally, and it is our relationships and being a 'trusted' person that the carers turn to in this crisis that will support them to continue in the caring role. Having all the up to date mental health links from other professions has been a must. The Samaritans stopped their text service, which had been a lifeline for one particular carer with autism who finds it difficult to talk on the phone. I contacted the mental health links for her and found another text service she was able to use. This was a massive issue for the carer and could have tipped her over the edge; however, knowing she could trust me and me having the ability to link to other services available ensured the situation was resolved.

This is by no means a comprehensive description of the challenges we face in our role. It will keep on changing as the Covid-19 crisis evolves. Being professionals in our role and having spent time building those important relationships in the community will stand us in good stead to be able to continue helping carers in their roles.

I believe it is going to be a while before life as we knew it, is back to normal. CarerLinks Carer Advisors are going to play a vital role in supporting carers to continue doing their amazing role that would otherwise be putting more pressure on our NHS and care providers.

**Fleur Roberts**

If you need support from our CarerLinks team, please call 0333 323 1990