

# Care and self-care

## 10 steps to more freedom for staff with caregiving responsibilities

A care situation has arisen – and with that a challenge that can be quite demanding on your time and energy. The situation can become so overwhelming that you might neglect your own mental and physical needs. We have compiled the following tips to encourage you to emphasise self-care along the path of balancing work and your role as a caregiver.

**1**

### **Make room for discussion and seek advice**

We are never really fully prepared for a care situation, unless you work in a care profession or have had previous experience. It is therefore perfectly legitimate and important to seek advice – this applies to practical matters of care as well as to how this affects your work.

A first point of contact could be your employer, e.g.

... in preparation for the care situation: Check with your employer if they offer information events on the subject of care – for example on the aspects of 'lasting power of attorney' (*Vorsorge-Vollmacht*)?

... in the event of a caregiving situation: Your employer might be able to give you information about support services or legal tips.

... over the course of a caregiving situation: Does your employer offer (information on) seminars, e.g. on how to relieve the burden with the help of technical possibilities, on self- and time management or how to develop coping strategies?

Above all, however, we recommend that you also get professional help (see 'Understand care also as a cooperative task').

## 2

### **Assess the care situation and its development**

It is usually unpredictable when and in what form a care situation will eventuate. In most cases, the need for care arises unexpectedly. The most pressing question is then: What does this mean for me?

It is therefore important to be able to correctly assess the care situation – both right now and for the future: What is the current state of health of the person requiring care? What are the forecasts for the next 1 to 5 years? What are the care needs? How is the extent of care likely going to develop?

Professionals will help you answer these questions: doctors and qualified nurses. Ask them for as much information as possible.

## 3

### **Get a clear picture of the range of tasks involved**

Caregiving has many facets. The care for an elderly relative ('elder care'), or a sick partner or child goes far beyond what is covered by the long-term care insurance. It requires assistance and support that also pertain to the following aspects:

- Household help
- Assistance with questions around finances
- Financial support
- Organisation of care services
- Emotional/ psychological/ social needs
- Mobility
- Health needs
- Physical/ personal needs

All this takes time and energy. Ask yourself honestly: Do I have this time? Do I have enough energy to perform these tasks? Read on to help you answer these questions.

## 4

### Understanding caregiving

Can you and do you want to be a caregiver? What tasks can you perform? How long can you perform them?

Do take into consideration the following, among other things: Medical advances are constantly increasing the duration of care. In 1997, for instance, care periods lasted for under 1 to less than 5 years in about 70% of cases, and 5 to more than 10 years in about 30%. In 2009, more than 40% of care cases lasted 5 to more than 10 years.<sup>1</sup> What could that mean for you?

## 5

Make sure you have a clear picture of the reasons why you are taking on the task of caregiving. These determine your attitude towards care and influence your motivation and, if necessary, your reserves and resilience. According to a survey, almost half of the caregivers care out of a sense of duty or family loyalty. Nearly 20% named pragmatic reasons such as 'no one else has time,' or 'I live nearby.' For 17%, compassion and helpfulness play a decisive role. Also 17% mention emotional connection, love and familiarity.<sup>2</sup>

## 6

Try to assess the effects of caregiving on yourself. Caregiving can be enriching in some aspects: It can, for instance, be a great teacher of patience, compassion and perseverance. Above all, however, it can teach you to set boundaries, because caregiving is a strenuous task: 62% of caregivers say that caregiving costs them a lot of their own strength. The rate for caregivers of patients with dementia is 71%. The load increases with the severity of the care condition. 55% of caregivers identified the feeling of constantly needing to be on call as a stress factor.<sup>3</sup>

Caregiving has psychological and social effects: It can lead to mental exhaustion, increased stress, frustration, isolation and also relationship problems with the person being cared for as well as your personal environment:

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<sup>1</sup> cf. German Federal Statistical Office 2010

<sup>2, 3, 5</sup> <https://www.tk.de/centaurus/servlet/contentblob/658484/Datei/2032/Forum-Versorgung-Pflege-Praesentation-Dr-Frank-Verheyen.pdf>

Does the caregiving burden your relationship to the care recipient? Do social contacts suffer?

The psychological burden can be tremendous: According to the DAK care report of 2015, 55% of caregivers have psychological problems, with 20% suffering from depression. Anxiety and sleep problems are also frequent side effects.

Lifting, holding, carrying – all these activities are strains on the body of a caregiver. Musculoskeletal disorders are found in 16% of caregivers. Back pain is a typical sign of stress.<sup>4</sup>

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Do you find sufficient balance – both mentally and physically? Can you reduce stress by taking regular respite? Do you have enough time for a hobby or meeting friends? Do you have time for sport or at least some movement exercises?

8

### **Understand care also as a cooperative task**

Try to keep responsibilities and tasks at a sustainable level. Usually, the caregiving responsibility lies mostly on the shoulders of one person, but it doesn't have to. If you are that person, remind yourself: Not only do you shoulder the main active load, you are also held accountable for the development of the care recipient's condition. This is a huge burden! Do you want to and can you carry this burden? Maybe there is a way to find a collaborative model of caregiving?

9

Share the caregiving responsibilities. Best case scenario, your relatives, friends and neighbours will help you cope with the wide range of caregiving tasks – as is the case for more than half of the caregivers (54%). 49% of caregivers enlist professional help – either from nurses that make house visits (41%) or from nursing institutions (day-, short-term and night care).<sup>5</sup> Open up to the idea of involving professional service providers and institutions: doctors for medical questions, nurses for practical advice, (day-care) clinics, short-term nursing homes, care advisors (*Pflegekasse*, i.e. care insurance provider,

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.dak.de/dak/download/pflegereport-2015-1701160.pdf>

*Pflegestützpunkte*, i.e. care support centres, Caritas or diaconia etc.) for information on available support and legal aspects. Utilise offers from voluntary organisations and self-help groups (for specific illnesses) as well.

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### **Also ask yourself:**

#### **How does caregiving affect my work?**

You won't be able to answer this question by yourself. Therefore, do open up to your employer. For example, initiate a conversation with your direct supervisor. There may also be colleagues who officially act as first contact persons for care issues.

**Add-on Ulm University: If you have any questions about care, please contact our Care Officers Ms Stöckle, phone 50-25012 or Ms Löw de Mata, phone 50-22816**

Describe your situation and clarify the challenges you perceive. It is advisable that give your position on the caregiving task some thought, i.e. whether you would like to perform it and to what extent (see above) before you talk to your employer. Together with your employer, you can then find out how to harmonise your professional tasks with those of caregiving.

Take your employer on board permanently – because caregiving requirements do change over time. A changed state of health can bring new challenges. Inform your employer about developments and changed requirements, because only then can you work together on finding solutions to relieve the burden.