Supporting staff who have caring responsibilities

Guidance for Managers

Introduction

At Newcastle University it is estimated that over 500 employees have caring responsibilities for elderly or disabled relatives, or caring responsibilities for reasons other than childcare. “Carers” in the context of this guidance refers to people who look after elderly, frail or disabled relatives or dependants. This guidance does not cover employees who have responsibility for caring for children under normal circumstances.

Newcastle University employees who are carers are involved in a wide range of caring activities. Some care for elderly or frail parents, some look after parents or relatives with dementia, some have disabled children, some are looking after partners with temporary, chronic or terminal illnesses. They do all of this in addition to their paid employment with us. Some of our employees are caring for more than one person.

What issues are carers dealing with?

Here are some typical issues that carers may be dealing with:

- Putting care arrangements in place to allow a loved one to continue living at home for as long as possible (this can be complex, emotionally draining and very time consuming).
- Being called to school because their disabled child has had a fall or has incurred an injury.
- Getting a parent out of bed and dressed before work, making their dinner after work, then returning at night to put them to bed.
- Answering personal alarm calls at all hours of the day or night.

These are just a few examples. Read Kate’s Story on page 5.

What Carers really need

What employees with caring responsibilities need, above anything else, is the ability to work flexibly. They may need to take more time off work than employees who do not have caring responsibilities. Carers also need reassurance that their requests are reasonable and they are not constantly having to “go cap in hand” to ask for this practical support.

[refer to Flexible Working Options document]
How to support carers

Everyone's situation is different. There is huge diversity amongst our staff who have caring responsibilities, including the type of job they do and the level of care they provide, which may itself be subject to change very suddenly. It will be helpful to:

- Discuss your employees' needs with them. You could make this a regular feature of their PDR.
- Encourage staff to be open with their situation. It is difficult for you to offer support if you are not aware of what they are dealing with.
- Ensure staff are aware of their entitlement to special leave.

Important things to remember

- Carers can't always plan when they need time off. They may be called away because of an emergency involving their dependent. This can be extremely stressful for the employee.
- Their first priority will always be to the person they are caring for (wouldn't this be the case for you too if it was your parent or child?).
- Work can often be a respite for employees who are carers.
- Employees who are carers often have exemplary sickness and attendance records and don't want to be seen to be “taking advantage of the situation”.
- Carers may not recognise symptoms of stress within themselves.

Working Flexibly

The ability to work flexibly is the most important work issue for carers. Sometimes managers are unsure if this is permissible, especially for front line staff. As managers you are encouraged to support your staff who are carers by giving serious consideration to whether they are able to:

- Change start and finish times
- Swap working days from time to time
- Work from home if possible [see Flexible Working Options]

As a manager you are empowered to make these decisions. Remember you are not giving carers preferential treatment, you are offering them support which is specific to their situation (which is often extremely stressful, challenging and may be short term).
Taking Special Leave

The table below shows the type of leave that is available staff who have caring responsibilities.

- Ensure that you and your staff know what is available.
- Encourage them to use special leave rather than taking annual leave if you are aware the reason they are taking time off is related to caring responsibilities, e.g. accompanying a parent to a hospital appointment.
- You can offer the special leave in hours if this suits their situation better.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of leave</th>
<th>Number of Days</th>
<th>Length of Service Requirement</th>
<th>Other information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leave to care for dependent</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Paid leave only with 3 or more years service</td>
<td>Managers discretion applies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emergency leave</td>
<td>2 (max 1 day at any one time)</td>
<td>Paid leave only with 3 or more years service</td>
<td>Managers discretion applied</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Other practical support

In talking to your employee, you should get a good understanding of what their specific needs are. Other ways in which you can support your staff include:

- Allowing them to be able to answer their personal phones during working hours.
- Agreeing a contingency in case they get called away at short notice. e.g. if they are on reception duty – how will this be covered?
- Making a referral to Occupational Health if you have any concerns about their health or wellbeing.
- Reminding them about the University’s Carers’ Network (see below).
- Thinking creatively about how to solve their issues.
- Seeking support from your Human Resources teams if necessary.

Newcastle University Carers Network

This staff network provides a platform for carers to ask questions, share practical advice or information, or simply meet others in a similar situation to their own. The network also provides external speakers to talk informally about a range of subjects. Informal meetings take place approximately every two months and the network has its own mailing list.

Further information can be found at: [www.ncl.ac.uk/diversity/about/networks/carers.php](http://www.ncl.ac.uk/diversity/about/networks/carers.php)
End of care

At some point your employee may no longer have a caring role. This may be because the person they cared for has moved on in one way or another, e.g. a disabled child going to University, they may have had to go into a residential or nursing home, or sadly, they may have died.

Whenever the end of care happens, your employee will need time to adjust and make plans for their future. They may be grieving, feeling guilty or may have financial concerns. Either way they may need some extra support whilst at work. Be prepared to discuss their needs with them and offer support if possible.

If you are concerned about the health or well-being of your staff member you can refer them to Occupational Health.

Further advice and support

If you require any further information or specific advice, please contact your Faculty or Service HR Manager.

Alternatively for general enquiries regarding caring or the carers’ network, please contact Jan Halliburton, HR Adviser (Policy & Projects), Level 4, King’s Gate, 0191 208 5974.

¹ Newcastle University Employee Opinion Survey 2010.
Kate’s story

Kate works in a professional role within the University. Her mum is 62 years old and has had front-temporal lobe dementia since she was in her early 50s.

“My mum's dementia is rare and affects her behaviour far more than her memory, as is the common misconception. She can be very aggressive and violent, followed by bouts of depression. She does not understand that she has dementia, cannot comprehend why she can no longer drive, why she has to live in care (she shares a home with three other dementia sufferers and requires 24 hour care).

The biggest challenge is managing her behaviour so that we don’t risk her being removed from the house. On a good night, she stays in the house no problem, but sometimes she gets so agitated that my partner and I have to have her come and stay with us. This is always disruptive to our lives as it can often mean we’re dealing with late night phone calls and have to rearrange our days to accommodate her staying.

Most mornings I get a phone call at around 6/7am to say that my mum is up and refusing her medicine. Often I can talk to her over the phone to calm her down but sometimes I have to go out and see her before work. During work, if I get a phone call from the care team, I know it’s important and always have to take it. Most of the time (2-3 times a month) it’s a situation I have to go and deal with immediately. My mum’s behaviour is very extreme and it can be hard explaining to my boss that I need to leave because she’s cut up all of her clothes, or because she’s threatening a member of the care team. Often (at least once a week) it’s just my mum in floods of tears, having convinced herself that I’ve been hurt in an accident or that I’m moving away from her.

If I get through work without a phone call, it still plays on my mind – I have Power of Attorney for my mum so I have to stay on top of her finances and benefits but I also feel an incredible pressure to ensure that she has some quality of life. Several times a week I visit her after work and try to spend some quality time with her.

The stress of being responsible for someone else in such a desperate and frustrating situation is what I find hardest to cope with. Her condition will deteriorate and this makes me incredibly sad. The positive thing for me is that I love my job, and it’s a welcome distraction for me.”