

## Dads care too

# A survey of the experiences of fathers who are carers

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### Key findings

- 119 dads responded, of all ages
- The highest proportion (72%) care for a son or daughter with a learning disability or autism.
- Nearly 20% had been caring for 21 years or more.
- 35% cared alongside being in employment. 40% of those spent 60 or more hours caring per week.
- A third of dads reported that they never get a break.
- 46% said caring had a negative impact on their mental health, and 43% said it had a negative impact on their physical health.
- Almost three quarters said they missed out on spending time with friends and family members as a result of being a carer.
- The most common support wanted but not received was breaks from their caring role.
- 55% said they felt the needs of male carers were different from female carers. Many felt their role as a carer was not recognised, or that services were not designed in a way which met their needs.

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## Introduction

Caring is often seen as a 'female' issue but it is something that affects a large number of men too. The 2011 Census found that in England and Wales more than 4 in 10 carers are male (42.3%) - amounting to 2.44 million men<sup>2</sup> providing care, **unpaid**, for a friend or family member who due to illness, disability, a mental health problem or an addiction.

Despite their vast number, there has been little research to understand the experiences of these men or the vital role that they play in their families.

Carers Trust and the Men's Health Forum sought to learn more about men's experiences of caring, the impact it has on their lives and the support services they feel would be helpful to them<sup>3</sup>. A total of 609 male carers from across the UK took part in a survey which included 119 fathers, all of whom were caring for their child/children<sup>4</sup> with a disability, long term conditions or mental health or addiction issue. This report showcases the experiences of these dads.

## The respondents

Dads from across the UK responded: 84 from England, 28 from Scotland, 3 from Wales and 4 from Northern Ireland. These were men of all ages from 18 to 75 and above. No responses were received from dads aged under 18.

Almost one third of dads were 45-54 (30%) and over a quarter (27%) were over the age of 65. This is consistent with the number of fathers who had retired from work and are caring for a son or daughter (30%).

## Age of dads completing the survey

18 – 24	0.8%
25 – 34	3.4%
35 – 44	19.3%
45 – 54	30.3%
55 – 64	19.3%
65 – 74	17.6%
75+	9.2%

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171776\\_310295.pdf](http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171776_310295.pdf)

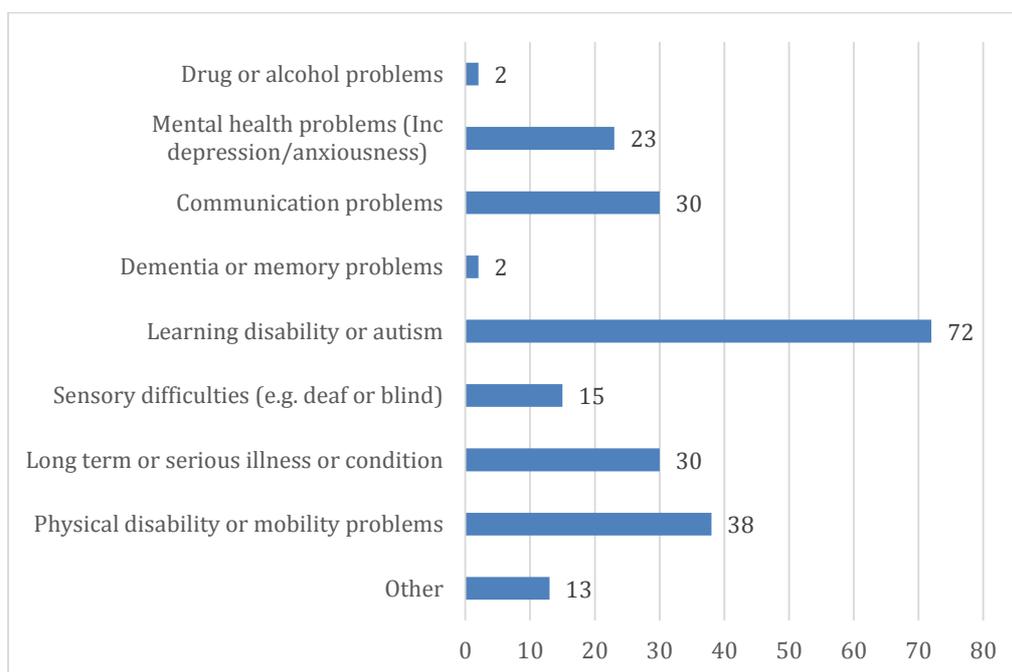
<sup>3</sup> Slack, K, & Fraser, M (2014) Husband, Partner, Dad, Son, Carer? A survey of the experiences and needs of male carers, London, Carers Trust and the Men's Health Forum.

<sup>4</sup> Refers to children, step children and sons/daughters in law, used throughout).

## Why did their sons and daughters need to be cared for?

These fathers were all supporting friends or family members with a range of care needs, shown in Figure 1. Of the dads caring for only one person<sup>5</sup> by far the largest group were dads caring for a son or daughter with a learning disability or autism (72%). Many people had multiple conditions or kinds of support needs including 38% of sons or daughters who had physical disabilities or mobility needs and 30% who had communication problems.

**Figure 1: Why was a dad caring for their son or daughter? (%)**



Many of the dads in the survey were also caring for other friends or family - a staggering 46.6 % of dads in the survey said they provided significant care for two or more people, for example their wife or partner, a parent or parents, or more than one their children.

44% of the dads who responded to the survey had sole responsibility for providing care for their child or children. There is a common stereotype that men are not the main providers of care and tend to take a more peripheral approach to caring in the home – evidently this is not the case and this perception must be challenged.

<sup>5</sup> It was not possible in the data set to differentiate the care needs of different members of the family where a carer was caring for more than one friend or family member.

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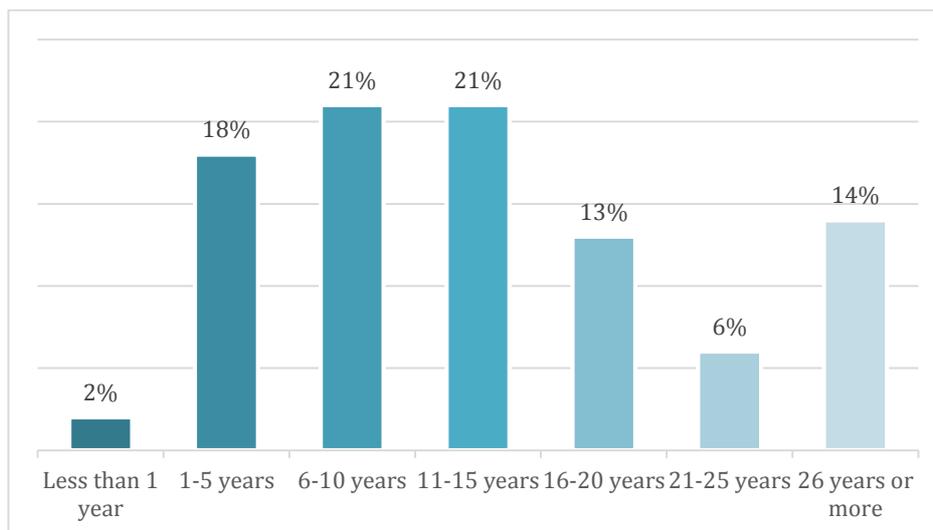
Of those who did share their caring responsibilities, support was most likely to come from a wife or partner (82%) and 1 in 5 (22%) were supported by a son or daughter.

However, 23% (1 in 5) were also caring for their wife or partner as well as being a carer for their child.

### How long had they been a carer?

20% of fathers who were carers in the survey had been caring for 21 years or more, shown in Figure 2. This perhaps shows that for many dads, caring for a child is a lifelong responsibility that may be less transient than other caring roles. It also reflects the care needs outlined above, high instances of learning disabilities for example.

**Figure 2: How long had dads been a carer? (%)**



### How many dads were also in work?

Whilst 30% of fathers in this survey had retired, 35% continue in employment alongside their caring role. Just under half of them (49%) felt their responsibilities as a carer were supported by their employers, for example the provision of flexible working arrangements. This leaves 51% who did not feel fully supported at work.

Dads said:

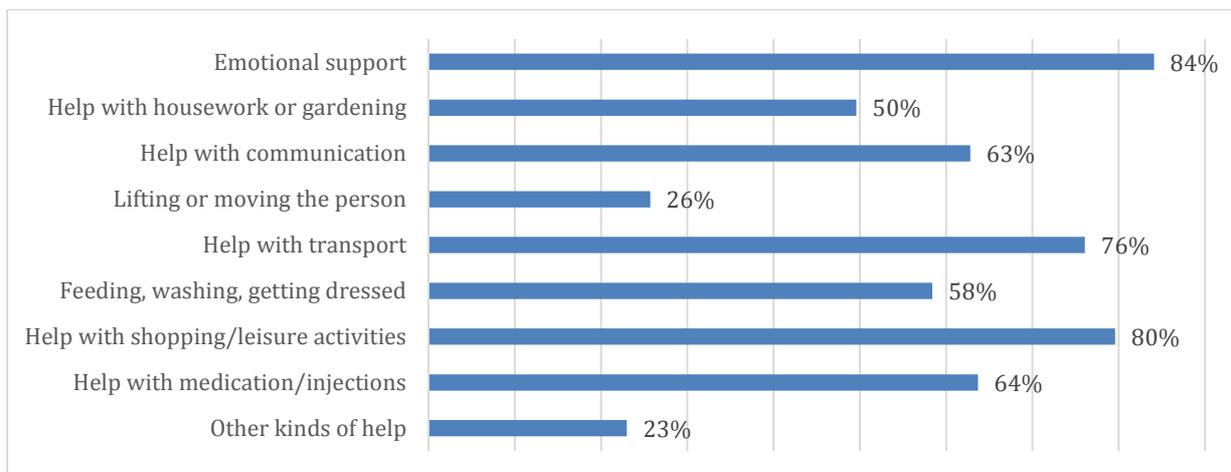
[My employer is] Not aware, didn't want it to affect me getting a job

However I would say this is also my biggest worry, the amount of time off and what my colleagues think of this. Can it be sustained by my employer over a length of time, do colleagues think I am a skiver.

### What caring roles do dads undertake?

These fathers provide help and support on a wide range of caring tasks. The vast majority provided emotional support (84%), help with transport (76%) and help with shopping or leisure activities (80%). These dads also helped with medication and injections (64%), with communication (63%) and with feeding, washing and getting dressed, (58%.) Figure 3 shows the range of caring tasks undertaken by dads in the survey.

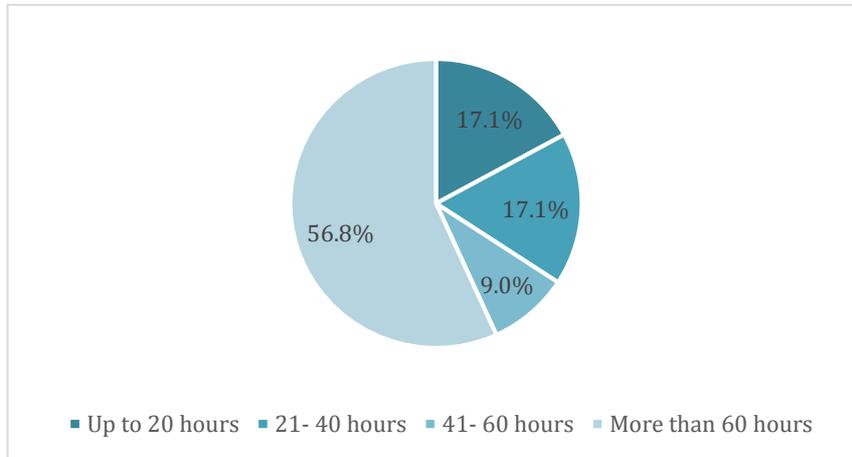
**Figure 4: Caring tasks undertaken by dads (%)**



### How much care do dads provide per week?

It is clear that the dads who responded were undertaking high levels of care. Overall, 56.8% said they provided 60 plus hours of care per week as shown in Figure 5

**Figure 5: How much care per week were dads providing? (%)**

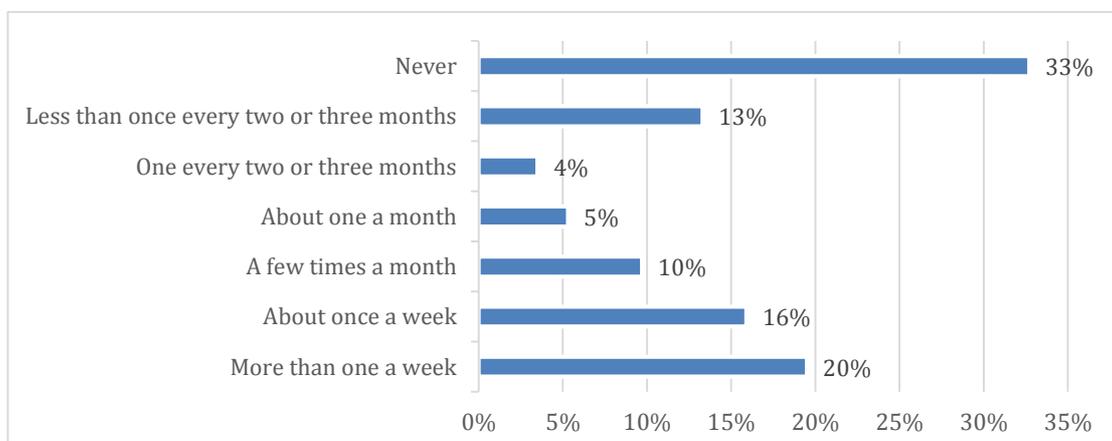


For those in employment (35% of respondents), 4 in 10 spent 60 hours or more caring per week and a further 15% undertook 41-60 hours of care per week. Of those who had retired, 47% spent 60 hours or more per week. Those who had given up work to care showed even higher levels of care - 89 of these respondents stated they provided 60 or more hours of care per week.

## Getting a break

A third of dads in this survey reported that they never get a break from their caring role and 13% only had a break every two or three months. Such demanding caring roles with no or few breaks is likely to have a negative impact on both mental and physical health.

**Figure 6: How often do you get a break? (%)**



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43% indicated that they experience long term health problems or disability themselves. This means that as many as 4 in 10 of the fathers in the survey were having to manage their own condition as well as the challenges of being a carer.

Almost half (47%) expressed that caring had a negative impact on their mental health, whilst 43% felt it impacted negatively their physical health.

### Has being a carer had a negative impact on your mental health? (%)

Yes	46.8%
No	31.5%
Not Sure	21.6%

### Has being a carer had a negative impact on your physical health? (%)

Yes	43.1%
No	35.8%
Not Sure	21.1%

The fathers in the study reported experiencing depression and high levels of stress and exhaustion. Some also mentioned struggling to stay healthy, with little time or energy to do exercise, or found themselves not eating healthily.

Despite obvious need, a fifth had not visited or contacted their GP for their own health in the past 12 months.

Dads said:

"I had a serious heart attack due to stress, poor diet and lack of exercise"

Since my wife died 3 years ago it has been harder to mix work and caring....It is stressful and sometimes frustrating

Worries for the future of my child. Stress of battling for provision of support for my child from the authorities. Loss of income due to carer responsibilities

"I had a nervous breakdown 10 years ago...Now feel sometimes the carers role takes me backwards

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## Isolation as a carer

Almost three quarters (73%) felt they missed out on spending time socially with other friends and family members. This can leave many feeling isolated and is likely to have a negative impact on their own mental health.

Dads said:

My partner and I get almost no time for each other. I am limited in my time for any social interaction. I do not feel my life is my own

Due to the nature of my boy's disability not many people understand enough to cope with their ways so we never get invited to most friends or family days

I can't get out with my wife very often. One of us has to be at home with our son. We don't want our children to grow up as carers.

## What support did dads get or want and what did they get?

Having a carer's assessment is a key way of enabling carers to express they support they feel they need now and the future. However only a third of dads (34.5%) said they had received a carers assessments. A further 56.4% said they had not received one and 9.1% said they were not sure.

Accessing advice and support can have a positive impact on carers, 50% of dads in the survey were accessing services from their local carers' organisation.

**Figure 6: Kinds of support received or wanted but not received (no's of dads)**



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Dads had accessed a range of kinds of support as a carer in the previous year. 27 of the dads in the survey had attended social activities with other carers, and 22 had received counselling, emotional support or had attended support groups.

However, a high proportion - 39 of the dads in the survey - stated they had wanted access to a break from their caring role but not been able to do so, and 25 had wanted financial or benefits advice and not received it

### **Do dads have specific needs as carers?**

55% of this group of male carers felt the needs of male carers are different to those of female carers in a range of ways, for example in the social networks that are available. This seemed to be particularly the case for single dads. There were also perceptions of male roles in society, or the kinds of roles they may have had earlier in life which may mean they feel unprepared to take on a caring role.

Dads said

“I am the carer of school age children and the ‘mums network’ does not encompass men. I am aware that some mums exchange childcare but that is something that is not there for single fathers

“Virtually all the services are orientated around women; it is assumed that women are the carers and there’s a lot of aromatherapy, massage etc all designed to help them”

If a male carer gives up his work to become a full time carer he can suffer greatly from low self esteem and low mood. I feel that male carers find it very difficult to make this adjustment”

We seem to be treated differently by the medical profession. I think that as most support for my daughter is female they don’t see me as they would her mother.

Males not as open about how they feel and can find it hard to ask for help.

As my wife is our son’s main carer and I am at work on week days like many men will be I often feel that I would like to be more involved on the day to day care issues that my son has.

I am the carer of school age children and the “mums network” does not encompass men. I am aware that some mums exchange childcare but that is something that is not there for single fathers.

This means that for many dads, there is a need to recognise their role which can sometimes feel invisible and unsupported. Those providing support for carers need to recognise dads who care as a group with particular needs, who may need support

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designed for them to enable them to access this and for them to feel it is inclusive and relevant. This will help to ensure these dads can play the role they want to within their families, and also to improve their own health and wellbeing.

### Conclusions

This research found that many dads are caring for significant periods of time, often alongside working, and often feeling unsupported or that services available do not meet their needs. Often they feel invisible, without the support networks that they feel might be available to women who care.

However with 42% of the caring population being male, and with a population with ever increasing care needs, we need to ensure men who care, including dads, are supported.

### Carers Trust and the Men's Health Foundation therefore call for:

- Fathers who care to be fully recognised and involved in the care of and decision making about their son or daughter to the extent that they and their families wish.
- Health and care professionals to recognise dads who care as a group likely to experience poor physical or mental health
- Children and family support services to recognise dads who care, in particular those who are single dads, and promote inclusion and involvement in networks and activities
- Employers to understand the important role that dads who care play in their families and adopt and publicise carer friendly employment policies, and ensure these are implemented.
- Support services including carers services and commissioners to consult dads who care to ensure services are built to meet their needs
- Communities and families to recognise the role played by dads who care and offer support.

For further information on Carers Trust's policy and research work to support the UK's 7 million carers contact [policy@carers.org](mailto:policy@carers.org)