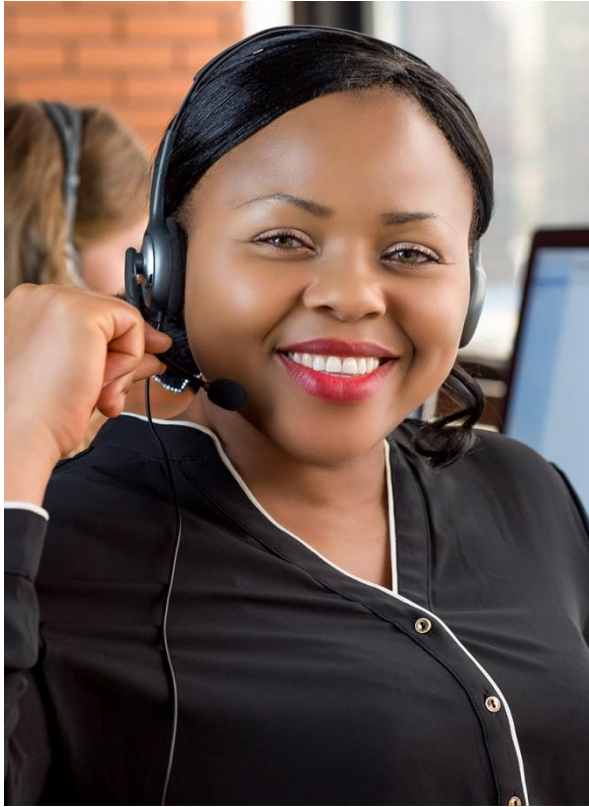


Toolkit



STARTING THE CONVERSATION

About carers in the workplace

Caring for an ill, older or disabled family member, partner or friend will have an impact on most of us at some point in our lives. Already 1 in 7 people in the UK workforce have caring responsibilities and this ratio is set to increase as people live longer and retire later. Recent Carers UK research identified that as many as 600 people a day in the UK give up work to care, often because they face a caring crisis without knowing where to go for information and support. And yet, caring is still an issue which people find hard to discuss and plan for in the workplace.

Who are carers in the workplace?

Employers for Carers uses the following definition to describe carers in the workplace: *Carers are employees with caring responsibilities that have an impact on their working lives. These employees are responsible for the care and support of ill, older or disabled family members, partners or friends who are unable to care for themselves.*

About this toolkit

This Toolkit has been produced by Employers for Carers (EFC) to help you either as an employee or a line manager to:

- start a conversation about caring, whether this is about your own caring situation or that of the colleague(s) you are managing
- raise current and potential future support needs, either for yourself as a carer or for the colleague(s) you are managing
- explore workplace and external support options that may help
- reach out to others in your team who might not realise that they are caring

Starting the conversation

A key challenge for both employees and managers is that caring is often a hidden issue in the workplace. Many working people do not recognise themselves as carers, know where to turn to for help, or feel comfortable about coming forward for support. So there can be many barriers to carers getting the help they need.

Whether you are an employee who is already caring, a manager, or a colleague in the team, it is helpful to be aware of the different types of caring situations which can arise.

For some of us, caring happens suddenly; someone you love is taken ill or has an accident, your child is born with a disability. For others, caring creeps up unnoticed: your parents can no longer manage on their own, your partner's health gets gradually worse. Many carers may be stretched to the limit, especially if caring and working. And, of course, many line managers will be carers too.

Evidence from Carers UK and Employers for Carers shows the adverse impact of caring on workers' health, if unsupported. Working carers often describe their lives as being 'turned upside down' when a crisis occurs, or the cumulative effects of caring as it 'creeps up unawares' and then becomes more challenging. Whether it is round-the-clock or for a few hours a week, in our own home or for a relative at the other end of a motorway, caring can have a significant impact on both our personal and working life.

Starting the conversation is about:

- creating a carer aware environment in your workplace and team by talking about caring (not only parenting) as part of life
- cultivating an open and inclusive culture within your workplace and team where people feel able to talk about their caring situations
- communicating what support your organisation offers for carers

Whether as colleagues or managers we can all play our part in reaching carers earlier – so they get the right support, in the right place, at the right time.

Employees

As a working carer, you may need a range of support at different times - from access to a phone to check on the person you care for, to leave arrangements that work around hospital discharge. **Telling someone at work** about your caring situation is not always an easy step and you might feel it depends on whether your employer or line manager is likely to be supportive.

- Find out by **asking your colleagues**, or if available in your workplace, **an HR colleague or union representative**. There may be existing support that you are not aware of, or you may find that your employer is open to exploring ways to support carers. Colleagues can be very supportive, and it may help as a first step to discuss your situation with someone you trust and feel comfortable with. You might find that other colleagues are also carers, and that together you are more able to talk to your employer about ways in which you could be supported.
- Prepare for your conversation with your manager by thinking through **possible options** for support that would help. For example, these might include a change in working hours (number of hours, or start and finish times), or a request for leave.

Other small adjustments might help such as permission to make/take personal phone calls or texts or having a car parking space close to the office on a temporary basis. Be prepared to think of more than one option that could help.

- Try to have a **flexible mindset** when discussing this with your manager. Of course you will sometimes face a crisis where you will need immediate flexibility or support. However, at other times, where your caring situation is more ongoing, try to think of ways in which you can help offer a solution which meets business needs too, and minimises impacts on your organisation and team. For example, with flexible working arrangements this might include offering to cover when the help is needed most in the workplace, and, with leave arrangements, giving advance notice of leave requests where you can.
- Be open to trying things on a **temporary or trial basis** to allow adjustments on both sides as this can help minimise risk for both parties.
- Although this can sometimes be difficult, focussing when possible on what **can** be done, not what can't, can help to build a positive and trusting working relationship with your line manager and encourage them to have a more flexible and supportive mindset too.

Managers

As a manager you may find it difficult to start a conversation about caring with an individual employee, or more widely, within your team. You may be unsure how to broach this for fear of upsetting the colleague(s) you are managing or you may be uncertain about what is the right thing to say.

Another challenge for managers is that caring circumstances are individual in nature: every situation is different and will need a tailored response. That is why starting the conversation is so important as it is, of course, only through getting to know the individuals you are managing that these issues can be properly addressed. It is also important that line managers have discretion and autonomy to apply key workplace policies and provisions in order to support the individuals in their team.

While managers cannot be expected to be experts in care, they can play a key role in providing good working conditions and pointers to external support. Whether your organisation is large or small, here are our **top ten tips** to help you start the conversation about caring:

1. Try to **'normalise' caring** and think about it as something which can happen to any of us, at any time, including during our working lives. It is part of the life course even if it is often a relatively hidden issue in the workplace. Think about it as part of your

wider work-life balance, or health and wellbeing, support, and include it in relevant staff induction conversations, training and one-to-one meetings etc. Just getting to know your team better will also help to increase the opportunities for the issue to be raised, and to create a climate where it feels more comfortable to talk about caring.

2. If you have not had any personal experience of caring try to **'walk in a carer's shoes'** and imagine how you might feel if faced by a caring situation as described above. For example, think about having to find care and support for a family member while fulfilling your current work responsibilities. And feeling stressed and worried but not wanting to appear unable to cope in front of your family and colleagues. Working carers often describe feeling anxious, unconfident and vulnerable about raising their caring situations at work. Putting yourself in a carer's shoes in this way can help to prepare for a conversation about caring and set the right tone for this.
3. As preparation **check out your workplace policies or provisions** which may support carers. In addition, sometimes relatively simple adjustments such as permission to take/make personal texts and phone calls, and informal flexibilities around start and leaving times, can make a real difference for carers. Making changes on a temporary or trial basis can also be helpful where caring situations are unpredictable and can give both parties a chance to see how things work.
4. As many people do not consider themselves as a carer, **think about the language you use** when you mention caring issues. For example, it is better not to ask 'Are you a carer?' but instead to say something like 'Are you looking after' or 'Are you supporting' a family member or friend who is older, seriously ill or disabled.
5. Be **approachable and consultative** and try to cultivate a flexible mindset by focussing on what can be done, not what can't. Try to encourage individuals to share information about their caring situation, and support needs, without being intrusive and crossing professional and personal boundaries. While employees are not obliged to share this type of information if you build a trusting working relationship they will feel better able to raise caring issues and come forward for support.
6. Always **respect confidentiality**; caring can be a sensitive and sometimes very distressing issue emotionally. If an employee shares information with you about their caring situation, do not communicate this to other colleagues in your team or organisation unless they have given you explicit permission to do so.
7. Many people come in and out of caring situations (carers are not a static group of people in the workplace) and these situations may also fluctuate and change. It is

therefore helpful not only to prepare for starting a conversation, but also how you can have a **regular, ongoing dialogue**.

8. People will often only take information about caring on board when it becomes relevant to them. So **regular reminders** about the issue – and workplace support available – in team meetings can also help to get the right information to the right people at the right time.
9. Highlight to employees in your team both **workplace and external support** available for carers, including signposting them to external organisations who can help such as Carers UK and Employers for Carers.
10. Be proactive and **lead by example**. Create an open and inclusive culture in your team which promotes the take-up of support to avoid carers feeling that they will be treated less favourably if they come forward. Senior figures and managers should 'walk the talk' where possible and communicate about their (current or former) caring responsibilities to show that this is no barrier to success. Highlighting such examples of caring can help to communicate the message that it is 'OK to talk about caring'.

Top ten tips for managers: summary

1. 'Normalise' caring – think about it as something that can happen to any of us and as part of the life-course.
2. Prepare by trying to 'walk in someone else's shoes' and think about how you might feel if you were faced by a caring crisis or situation.
3. Check out your workplace policies or provisions that may support carers.
4. Use the right language to describe 'caring' and 'carer'.
5. Be approachable and consultative and try to encourage individuals (carers) to come forward for support.
6. Always respect confidentiality.
7. Get ready to have a regular and ongoing conversation as caring situations are likely to fluctuate and change.
8. Give regular reminders about caring issues, and workplace support available, to ensure you reach new carers.
9. Highlight both workplace and external support available for carers.

- 10.** Lead by example – create an open and inclusive culture in your team and make it ‘OK to talk about caring’ in the workplace.

Three next steps

- Tell members of your team that your organisation is a member of EfC and that all our resources are available to them. Circulate your organisation’s membership code to your team so that they can access these resources.
- Circulate the monthly EfC e-bulletin to all employees as there will be new carers in your workforce regularly. Employees can also sign up to receive the e-bulletin on the EfC website.
- Talk about caring and the support you offer using specific examples from within your workplace.

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