

**A**lthough caring for a person with dementia at home can be rewarding, for many carers it can be a significantly stressful experience (de Vugt & Verhey 2013; Robertson *et al* 2007). Stress can become particularly apparent as the person being cared for starts to require ever high levels of assistance, when the impact on carers can be profound.

Most carers report feeling isolated and under-valued at some point (Carers UK 2017). Difficulties adapting to change in the dynamic of their relationship may contribute to feelings of stress, guilt and anticipatory grief as their role changes from life partner, daughter or son to that of a carer (Sze Ki Cheung *et al* 2018).

Stress can also arise as carers try to combine their caring role with other responsibilities such as looking after children, grandchildren or other family members (Steiner & Fletcher 2017). We will explain how an online service launched in Salford is helping family carers by offering dementia-focused communication training and structured support using an internet-based video-conferencing system.

### Empowered Carers

“Empowered Carers” is a family carer support initiative based on the well-established New York University Caregiver Intervention (Gaugler *et al* 2011, Mittelman *et al* 2004). This approach has been adapted widely and generally consists of an initial course of four or more

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# Video-based support service for carers

Caring for a family member with dementia can be rewarding but can also be very stressful. **John Chatwin, Rachel Yates Hoyles** and **Phil McEvoy** explain how a new service, offering video-based contact with support workers over the internet, is helping carers in Salford

individual and family counselling sessions, followed by additional support that can be flexibly adapted to the changing needs of the carer.

A key element is for the carer to have access to a person who can listen and help them come to terms with feelings of guilt, loss, anger and regret, feelings that can have such an effect on their mental health and their relationship with the person with dementia. Also underlying the approach is a process based on the psychoanalytical concept of mentalisation.

At a practical level, this means that the support worker tries to help the carer understand how reactions to stressful situations can be influenced by deeply engrained emotional responses. Once these connections are made, a carer can often learn when to step back from re-occurring situations before stress levels escalate.

### Video-conferencing

Our Empowered Carers initiative in Salford takes referrals from a variety of medical and community agencies, including GPs, mental health teams, community dementia support organisations and other NHS services. Carers may also self-refer. After an initial face-to-face meeting, carers are encouraged to have their subsequent support sessions using a secure video-conferencing app called



Project lead Rachel Yates Hoyles (left) and support worker Amanda Barrell demonstrate how Empowered Carers works

“Zoom”, which is similar to Skype and can be freely downloaded to any smartphone or other internet-enabled device.

From a carer’s perspective the conferencing app has the advantage that it enables several people to take part in a discussion at the same time from different locations. This feature has been very useful in enabling family members who might not be able (or willing) to come to a conventional support session to engage with the process.

Many carers, given assistance, have been quick to embrace the flexibility and convenience of being able to talk to a support worker from home, even if they have previously been unfamiliar with technology other than using their smartphone for basic tasks like texting. Where this is the case, it is often

simply a matter of gently acclimatising people to something new. For those carers who really don’t want to use video-calling, or who may not have access to a smartphone or the internet, support workers are able to work in a more traditional way, either face-to-face or over the phone.

Generally speaking, user feedback has indicated that the video-based aspects of the service have been much easier to use than expected. As one representative person told us: “The video app is so easy, and I don’t have to leave the house. Being a carer 24/7, it enables me to receive support and feel comfortable and connected. I don’t like talking to family and friends, the service enables me to talk openly about my everyday challenges and learn tips to help me get through the day.”

## Conclusion

Empowered Carers is still a relatively small-scale experimental service. It is partly funded by Salford Community and Voluntary Services, a community health and welfare charity, so has initially focused particularly on helping family carers in this area. As awareness of it has grown, so has demand.

Currently, we employ two part-time support workers, but as they are now working at their maximum capacity of around 30 family carers there are plans to recruit and train more staff. In the Salford area alone, there are scores of family carers who would benefit from using the service, and the number is constantly rising.

Our long-term plan is to build up capacity so that ultimately the service can be offered nationally. Because it is primarily an online intervention, the location of carers is no problem as long as they have internet access – or at least a phone. This means that, at least in the medium term, the service will continue to be based in Salford, even if referrals from other regions are taken on.

The effectiveness of the initiative is being carefully evaluated. We are measuring how levels of caregiver depression change as a result of using the service and whether or not the quality of life and social health of the person being cared for improves as their carer puts what they learn into practice.

Early indications are very positive. We are finding, for example, that carers report definite improvements in the levels of stress they experience as a result of their caring role. More significantly, they often make direct connections between this stress reduction and specific techniques or processes they have learned during their support sessions. As another representative carer put it:

*I have started to think more of what challenges may lay ahead*

*for me and my wife. I now feel equipped to deal with whatever comes my way.*

In addition to a broad process evaluation, a sociological study is being conducted in collaboration with researchers from the University of Salford. This uses a research method called conversation analysis (Chatwin & McEvoy 2019), which will give a clearer picture of how elements of communication in support sessions operate at a more detailed interactional level.

For more information go to our website at <http://empowered-conversations.co.uk>.

## References

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