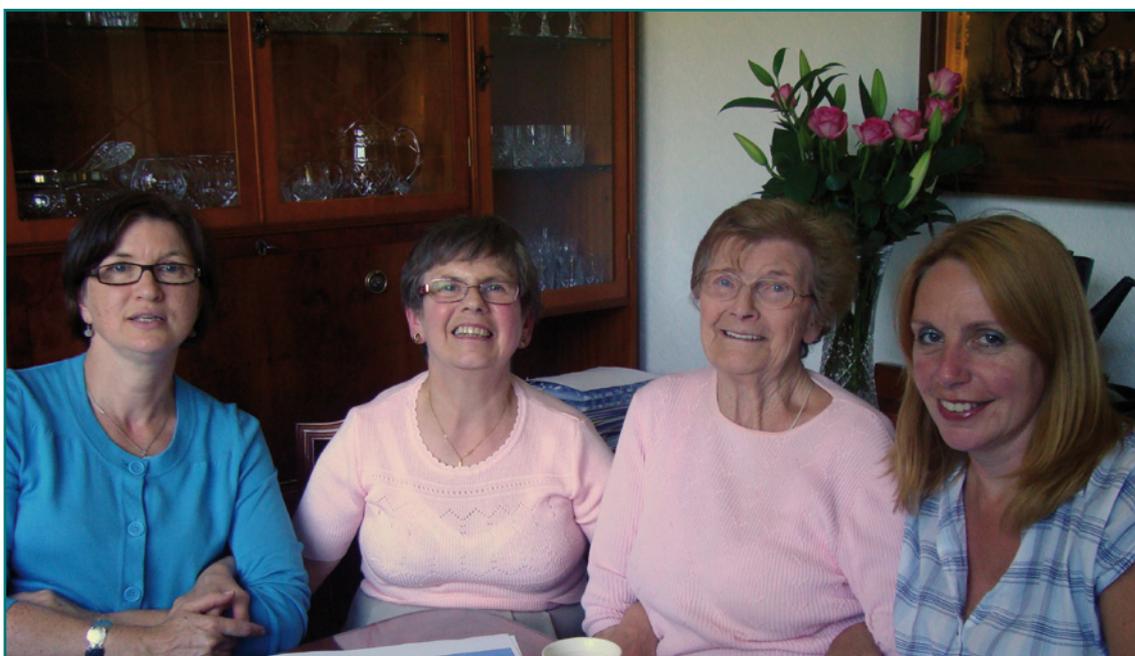


Circles of Support and Mutual Caring

by
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This booklet is for people who know older families, and particularly those where a person with a learning disability and their older relative are giving essential support to each other. This is often known as 'mutual caring'.

The aim is to encourage workers and others to think about the importance of support networks for these families and to develop Circles of Support to improve these.



What is a Circle of Support?

A Circle of Support is a group of family, friends and supportive workers who come together to give support and friendship to a person. The circle helps them do the things they would like to do and achieve new things in their life. Circles are a way of achieving person centred support. The things that a Circle of Support will help with will depend on a person's situation and what they want to happen in their life.

Why are Circles of Support a good idea for older families where there is mutual caring?

- Older families often find their network of support gets smaller as they age; relatives and friends may move away or die or older parents become less active and more time is spent indoors.
- Being a carer often leads to people feeling lonely as it takes up time that might otherwise be spent going out and about and meeting people.
- People with learning disabilities who provide care to a relative are often not recognised, particularly by older people's and health services. This means that they are often receiving little or no support through social care services.
- It can be hard for people with learning disabilities and older family carers to talk to each other about the things that are worrying them, including what could happen in an emergency or plans for the future. Yet change is likely to occur and putting plans in place can be very reassuring.
- Older family carers worry about who will support their relative to speak up and be listened to when they are no longer able to fulfil that role. They want reassurance that someone will notice if their relative is not happy, not safe and not living a full and meaningful life.

How can Circles of Support make a difference to older families where people are supporting each other?

A circle should help older families to feel they are not on their own and to know other people are concerned and willing to help out. Circles can help people to:

- Get back in touch with people they used to know
- Meet new people and go to new places
- Talk about the future and start to plan and prepare for it

- Get practical help with such things as keeping fit and well, support with day to day life and getting a break from caring
- Get emotional support, including coping with caring and bereavement.

10 steps to setting up a Circle of Support

1. Think about whether the Circle is just for the person with learning disabilities or whether they would like a joint Circle with their older relative - a 'Family Circle'.
2. Think about who might be in a Circle? A 'relationship map' can help to do this. People who live too far away to get to Circle meetings may be able to give support in a different way.
3. Offer help with the task of inviting people to be part of a Circle. This may involve going to meet people. It may be helpful to give them a copy of this booklet by way of explanation. Often family carers are concerned that people would not want to give up time to be part of someone's Circle. In practice, people are often pleased to get involved, so it is always worth asking.
4. Choose where the first Circle meeting will take place. This may be in the person's home, someone else's home, in a pub, café or wherever will be comfortable.
5. Decide on a day and time when most people will be able to be there.
6. Try to arrange Circle meetings so that they are friendly and enjoyable. It is helpful to have food and drinks, take photographs and celebrate special events, such as birthdays.
7. Before the first meeting, it may be helpful to the person whose Circle it is if you talk together about what they would like to be discussed; their worries, their hopes and anything they would like more support with.
8. Make sure people at the Circle meeting talk about these worries and hopes and that everyone has a chance to contribute their ideas.
9. Draw or write down ideas and use these to make a plan that makes things happen. Agree who will do what and when they will try to do it by.

10. Before the Circle meeting finishes, look at what has worked well and what has not worked so well. This can be used to make changes for the next time you meet. Arrange another date...

Janet's story

Janet has recently started a Circle of Support and it is already helping her to make choices and changes that have helped her and her mother.

Janet and her mum care for each other. Janet is 61 years old and her mother is 84. Janet's mother has health problems following a stroke: she has fallen in the house and Janet has had to call the emergency services. Janet does the shopping and cleaning whilst her mum does most of the cooking.



Janet has had help from Christine, a worker at the Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities, to set up her Circle of Support. They talked about the people who were important in Janet's life; her mum, people she knows at church, a neighbour and a local Mencap group. They explained their ideas to Janet's mum, who agreed it was a good idea. When they talked about it with her friends at church, one of them said 'It would be good to meet the people Janet knows at Mencap, as we don't know them and don't know what they do'.

At the first Circle meeting everyone got to know each other and helped Janet talk about her hopes and worries. Her biggest worry was that she felt she was getting very tired because of her caring responsibilities. She wanted some time away from being a carer, but was scared to leave her mum. The person from Bromley Mencap helped her to join in a holiday to Cornwall that they were arranging, and the neighbour offered to visit Janet's mum every day while she was away. Other support was arranged so that both Janet and her mother felt safe and relaxed during the holiday. Janet would not have left her mother unless she knew there was trustworthy support in place.

The Circle has continued to meet and support Janet with other things in her life. Everyone enjoys meeting up and Janet is happier and more confident that she and her mum have a group of people involved and interested in their lives.

Further information

This booklet has been produced as part of the Mutual Caring Project, which has been supported by Lloyds TSB Foundation for England and Wales, Valuing People and the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation.

A range of resources relating to Mutual Caring, including a DVD and booklets for older families and workers, have been produced by the Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities. For these, and other information about Circles of Support and other person centred planning tools, visit the Foundation's website at www.learningdisabilities.org.uk or email fpld@fpld.org.uk