

Caring at Christmas

Summary findings

This year has been exceptionally hard for many carers. Some are looking forward to Christmas and seeing family and friends over the holidays, but others remain concerned and worried about how they will manage:

- 59% were too worried about COVID-19 to risk seeing their family and friends this year, meaning they will have to go without their usual support.
- 44% are very worried about the fact that they will have no support.
- 45% said they were very worried about the extra costs.
- 49% of carers said Christmas makes them feel more lonely than normal.

In addition:

- 68% have had to go without so much support this year, they do not think that Christmas will be any different.

At the end of this briefing, we set out what carers want to help them through Christmas and the New Year and our recommendations for how the government can provide them with additional support to help them cope during the pandemic.

About caring and Christmas

Christmas can be a joyful time, a chance to catch up with family and friends and to spoil yourself and those around you. However, it can also be an incredibly difficult, with extra costs, fewer services, and increased loneliness. Following a challenging year for many people, but particularly carers, there is no doubt that Christmas will be very different this year for all of us.

Some carers are looking forward to the festive period: for them, the opportunity to see a small number of family and friends will not only enable them to take a break but also provide some hope during a difficult year. The ability to create support bubbles has been a lifeline for some carers and shows the real importance of informal as well as formal support to enable them to cope.

Carers experiences throughout the pandemic

This year has been exceptionally hard for carers. Carers across the country were already providing an incredible amount of care unpaid for family or friends before the pandemic and this has had a profound impact on their lives. Each day, throughout the pandemic, carers have been providing £530 million worth of care.

With many of their vital services closed or not being used out of fear and risk of infection, carers' caring responsibilities have increased even more. The majority (81%) of carers are still providing more care than before the March lockdown. More than three quarters (78%) of carers reported that the needs of the person they care for have increased, leaving them worried about what the future will look like.

Two thirds of carers have not been able to take any breaks at all during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is therefore unsurprising that more than half (58%) of carers have seen their physical health impacted by caring through the pandemic, while 64% said their mental health has worsened.

Although awareness of caring has increased, with millions of additional people becoming carers overnight at the beginning of the pandemic, the role unpaid carers have played in the effort against COVID-19 is often forgotten. Many carers feel invisible and unrecognised despite all that they do.

Whilst some Government leaders notably recognised carers quickly, others did not. The last nine months have left carers exhausted and close to breaking point. All of the nation's governments and local leaders must do more to support carers.

Carer's expectations and worries about Christmas

59% of carers were too worried about COVID-19 to risk seeing their family and friends this year, meaning they will have to go without their usual support.

52% of carers said they will miss seeing family and friends, but they would still enjoy Christmas. Although carers reported feeling lonely and isolated having not seen family or friends, for many the risks of contracting COVID-19 were too high.

"I can't visit my family for help, as my parents are higher risk due to their age and other family members have underlying health conditions, so are not in our support bubble. I wouldn't want to put anyone at risk, so it's a case of just getting on with it at the moment. I'm still looking forward to Christmas (it's one of my favourite times of the year) and I want to make it special for my son; but the pressure of working, caring, supporting my son doing college work, housework, etc is becoming so much that I'm reaching my limits."

"We have been shielding since March and haven't seen family/friends properly since then. No one has been able to visit inside our house due to the pandemic and having vulnerable family. It has been very lonely and has affected all of us. I am not sure if we will have family as usual this Christmas, the risk is too high."

For some carers, Christmas gives them an opportunity to see family and friends and something to look forward to. Although many were anxious about the risk of seeing

family and friends. 39% of carers said Christmas gives them an opportunity to spoil themselves.

“A bit apprehensive as my husband is highly vulnerable, but we are looking forward to seeing our children and grandchildren who will be the only ones in our bubble.”

“I am so tired and need a break. I’m anxious as we are going to our son’s house for several days. I understand that it is a risk, but it will mean I am not looking after my husband by myself for a few days which is so important.”

Some carers highlighted that Christmas will be very different for them this year, due to the condition of the person they are caring for changing. Those caring for someone in a care home or at the end of someone’s life were particularly concerned about what Christmas will be like this year.

“I am elderly, all on my own, with my family far away. My wife of 57 years is in a lockdown nursing home, very ill. Unlikely I shall see her. Christmas this year is not for celebration and for parties. Christmas is where the lonely and isolated cope as best they can.”

“I worry about my mood and that of my very ill husband, at what should be the happiest time of year. I wonder honestly if we will have another Christmas together. His final months are restricted and worry filled and lonely for both of us. With Covid and the restrictions I wonder how we keep emotionally above water.”

34% of former carers indicated that they found Christmas challenging, while 33% of former carers felt that Christmas was a positive time and gave them an opportunity to remember their loved ones. Many have mixed emotions about Xmas.

“A family member died in October so there will be another empty chair, but her distress at not seeing us made the end of her life very difficult, so there is also a relief.”

“My beautiful dad died earlier this year and as his full-time carer I miss him terribly. So mixed feelings about Christmas. I’ll be with my son, which is perfect, but with a heavy heart.”

“Supporting my father aged 96, who still misses his wife (mum died five years ago) terribly, especially on family occasions. It is tough but sharing memories and traditions keeps her with us.”

49% of carers said that Christmas made them feel more lonely than usual. Many carers highlighted that Christmas is not different to other days, and they still need to provide their usual levels of care. Carers caring for someone with conditions such as dementia highlighted the challenges of their loved one not remembering Christmas.

“I have provided care for over 8 years now. Because caring is draining, Christmas holds no interest for me anymore. If those I care for can experience no fun, then I don’t feel I should.”

“Christmas is going to be no different than any other day this year. No support to help with caring.”

“Living with mum and Alzheimer’s changed Christmas forever; she doesn’t remember it’s Christmas and sometimes having more time away from work is worse for my mental health.”

44% of carers said they were very worried about the fact that they will have no support. A further 68% said they had already had to go without lots of support this year so Christmas will be no different. Many carers highlighted that they were struggling without being able to access help and support.

“All Christmas means is more work and more stress. With friends being unable to help because of Covid, I have all the caring to do on my own without a break and I am just about too burnt out. I look after my daughter 24/7 and now my mum needs care her social worker expects me to do a large amount of that as well and I can’t cope anymore. There is just too much to do. All I want is a break but I know I can’t get one.”

“I’m a full-time disabled carer to my mum who has severe COPD and is on oxygen 24/7. I feel rather lonely majority of the time this year, and Christmas is no different. Because of covid-19 I won’t get the chance to go and see family or friends, and I won’t be able to have a break. The groups I used to attend are not being held so I feel more alone and unsupported.”

“We love Christmas but this year will be very hard, I’ve not had a break all year because of care home not taking anyone for respite”

45% of carers were worried about the cost of Christmas. Carers highlighted the additional costs of care through the Christmas period, while others were already concerned about the cost of the pandemic.

“All agency services at bank holidays are charged at double rates - this makes it very burdensome, at both Christmas and Easter especially (two days each at double rates). Christmas is especially worrying as many regular carers will be taking a break. Although my husband has NHS Continuing Health care, this by no means covers all his costs. We make up a significant amount - around £400-£500 a week out of pension income and savings. We only spend money on food, household bills and my husband’s care. It is a wretched time of the year for me.”

“Being at home from February until present has been difficult. Apart from a few days during the summer I have experienced extreme cold: my utilities bills are high and with no extra income to offset, this cost has placed me in fuel poverty. Isolation, because I’m in the vulnerable group needing to shield, does not help. Government should help with winter fuel costs to help disabled on benefit meet these costs”.

Support for carers to manage over Christmas

Christmas is often a time of great joy for carers, but even before the COVID-19 pandemic, many find it incredibly difficult with extra costs, fewer services and for some, it can be very lonely. Carers were given a series of options about what support would make Christmas better for them. These are their top responses:

- 81% said going into the New Year with a clear sense that the Government values carers and will provide more support and recognition
- 59% said being able to see friends and family and get a break from caring
- 52% said services that support them are open and available, giving them a break
- 46% said a rise in Carer's Allowance
- 36% said a supportive local community
- 33% said being able to afford Christmas

Most carers wanted a clear sense that the Government values carers and will provide more support and recognition. Many carers have felt invisible during the pandemic and have been left taking on extraordinary hours of care pushing them close to breaking point.

"For the Government to recognise that for some of us caring is 24/7. It's not just an unpaid caring position and it needs to be recognised, as our health both physically and mentally is suffering and there is no support. We save the Government millions of pounds."

"The English government have made no concessions to carers, no extra payments etc which could pay for carers to get assistance and give us a break."

"Being recognised. Caring is hard physically but even more so mentally and emotionally, especially when it's a family member you take care of. I wish the government helped us more than they do, appreciated us more than they do."

59% of carers said being able to see friends and family and get a break from caring, and a further 52% said services that support them and are open and available to give them a break would help them.

"Covid has highlighted how important family and friends' support is. This in turn shows the importance of informal help when so little formal help exists! I'd like to see social activity locally and ring-fenced central funding to help unpaid carers cope."

"We have a good network of friends, but the restrictions prevent me from, having the sort of break I need."

"Respite and affordable social care. I haven't had a break since before the first lockdown in March and won't have one over Christmas."

“More support from our local community. We have no daycentre for the disabled. I want the local parish council to know that we exist. They seem to care about the elderly, but not the disabled.”

Carers highlighted the closure of local services over the Christmas period, impacted on both them and the person they care for.

“Day services that my mum attends close for the whole of the Xmas period, leaving her confused and puts more strain on myself and family.”

“My son’s respite centre has been closed for a while, I know he will get respite again but I just feel I need a bit of a break.”

Many carers highlighted the challenges of managing financially, with 33% saying being able to afford Christmas would help them and a further 46% said a rise in Carer’s Allowance

“Better financial support would help as I manage my loved one on my own and don’t use any other agencies to help. I reduced my working hours to 2 days a week however I still don’t qualify for the Carer’s Allowance.”

“Although I work, I’m not eligible to receive a Carer’s Allowance. However, I run up additional expenses with petrol, car maintenance and loss of annual leave which is always used for hospital appointments or caring duties. It would help if this was taken into account and some additional support was available”

“Being able to have my heating on when needed knowing that I’ll have enough money to put in the meter. I get £67 a week to care for my son.”

What can be done to make a difference for carers at Christmas time

With Christmas on our doorsteps there are a number of differences that could be made this year, and in following years:

- A recognition that many have to care alone over the Christmas period and that support still matters.
- Community could make a much bigger difference to carers locally, with local community and faith organisations reaching out and connecting with carers. The suggestions that carers gave us included a hot meal; support for a non-English speaking mum who was being cared for; someone to walk the dog occasionally.
- A supplement to Carer’s Allowance to match the £20 rise in Universal Credit would make a difference to those struggling financially and this supplement should stay in place longer term.
- Services need to be aware that this is a particularly hard time for carers, when support they are used to shuts down.

“Christmas and life itself would be so much better if I had just a little more help from local communities “and especially financially as that is the biggest struggle I find especially as my life is on hold.

In the future, to make Christmas more caring for carers we recommend:

- Greater awareness of caring and the impacts of caring by society all year round and particularly at Christmas time.
- More caring conversations to happen throughout the year between families, friends and communities.
- A supplement for carers entitled to Carer’s Allowance all year round to prevent extra poverty at Christmas.
- Better identification of carers by services and support all year round so that there can be better targeting of help at Christmas time.
- Boosted community drives and support throughout the Christmas festive period.
- Similar support to Christmas should be considered for non-Christian faiths over their festive and holiday periods.

About this research

Carers UK carried out an online survey between 7 December and 10 December 2020. A total of 2,284 people responded to the survey. Compared to the carer population as a whole, respondents to this survey were more likely to be female and caring for a high number of hours every week. As not all respondents completed every question in the survey, a number of the figures given in this report, including those presented here, are based upon responses from fewer than 2,284 people. Of those who responded to the survey:

- 1% are 0-24, 4% are 25-34, 10% are 35-44, 25% are 45-54, 36% are 55-64, 18% are 65-74 and 6% are aged 75 and over.
- 76% identify as female and 22% identify as male.
- 78% live in England, 9% live in Scotland, 11% live in Wales and 3% live in Northern Ireland.
- 35% care for a parent or parent in law, 38% care for a spouse or partner, 32% care for a son or daughter or son or daughter in law,
- 5% care for 0-9 hours a week, 6% for 10-19 hours, 7% for 20-34 hours, 13% for 35-49 hours, 9% for 50-69 hours, 7% for 70-89 hours and 53% for over 90 hours a week.

About Carers UK

Carers UK is the leading charity representing the millions of people who provide unpaid care for ill, older, or disabled family members, or friends. We provide advice, information and support as well as providing insights into carer’s experiences.

Contact us

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