

Kate spent decades working for the County Council.



About my caring roles and experiences

I cared for my mum and dad for over 20 years. Dad became gradually more ill with COPD, and mum who had mixed dementia and rheumatoid arthritis, cared for him - but I was caring for both as well, popping in every day around work. I was also a single parent.

One day both Mum and Dad were ill and they'd called me from work to help. Luckily my manager was fine with this, so I rushed round there. I settled them down and was washing up, prior to going back to work when I cut my hand and it wouldn't stop bleeding and I thought, 'If this doesn't stop bleeding, I will have to go to A&E'. I knew I had to get back to work, then pick my son up from school and leave Mum and Dad, so I couldn't do that. And that's when I suddenly thought that this may not be manageable anymore. That was the day when I thought to myself, 'This isn't going to get better, this is only going to get worse.'

After dad died, it became clear that mum's dementia was a lot worse than we thought, and then I was pretty much going in every day to see her after that.

Then during COVID, she fell and broke her hip. She never really got her mobility or her confidence back to what it was before, so that was when we got support from Crossroads Care Gloucestershire. It helped take the pressure off me a little bit, because carers were coming at either end of the day.

It was March 2022 when we were told that she was at the end of her life, but she went on for another three months. She had to go to Moreton-in-Marsh hospital and I don't drive, so getting up there every day was really difficult, and I had to rely on friends to help with that. It's just been a really tiring year and a very sad time.

Now mum's gone, it's going to be odd. Only doing one lot of shopping and, not thinking, 'Has mum got this or that?' and 'Can I sort something out while I go on holiday? It's going to be strange not having those considerations. Even if I went on holiday, I was still thinking, 'I shouldn't be here, I should be at the end of the road just in case she needs me.'

What has been your experience of working and caring?

Throughout, I was working for the county council, which was hard to fit everything around. Before that, I was a single parent working around childcare with reduced hours. Luckily, I kept those hours, which meant when my son grew up, I used that time for my mum and dad instead.

I was popping in on my way to work, and then popping in on my way home from work. It was just what I did. I'm not saying it wasn't hard, because it was, but mum was so lovely and a pleasure to look after.

When I became a parent, my employers were quite good, but caring for parents isn't given quite the same importance as working around school hours. It's different looking after older people, because they're there all the time, they're not taken care of between nine to three every day.

You can get a call at any time. In fact, a couple of times dad and mum were both taken ill. That was stressful when you're at work. You're thinking, 'What am I supposed to do now then? I've got to be here at work.'

Sometimes your mind is not really on the job, because you're thinking 'Has mum got this? Do I need to get this for her on the way home? The stress of it wasn't considered by my employers. I think they thought, 'We've let you do the hours you want; we've done our bit', and that if I was at my desk that meant everything was fine but my mind wasn't on the job a lot of the time.

County councils are equal opportunities employers, but I don't think carers are seen in that way, as a group that needs extra support. **In my experience, caring doesn't tend to be taken terribly seriously. Because it's unpaid it doesn't really affect anybody, and employers view it as something you choose to do in your spare time, like playing badminton or salsa dancing.** But there is no choice because if I hadn't, then what would have become of my mum?

What support did you receive in the workplace?

One of the things about being a carer is that you don't tend to look after yourself properly, which means it doesn't occur to you to ask for help. You're just used to taking everything on board, everybody else's stuff, as well as your own, and carrying it around. You don't tend to say to work, 'I need help.'

I've worked for the county council pretty much all my working life. **I managed by applying for different jobs that fitted around caring. I never really said anything to my employer.** Until my last job, when it came out of the interview, they asked me why I was only applying for part-time. I told them I was looking after my parents.

There was no introduction to any carers policies. I think something probably existed, but I never really went into it - I was too busy dealing with the thing in front of me. That's the thing about carers, you just assume, 'I can deal with it because that's what I do.' You don't like to show that you're not coping.

I had many different bosses; some were great, and others weren't so great. You don't ask for help because you don't know what the response is going to be. You just think, 'It's my problem. I've got to deal with it' and you just absorb all the stress into your body.

You're always beholden to whoever your manager is. My last manager was a lot younger than me, and had no children, or caring experience. The manager before that was great. Anytime anything went wrong, she'd say, 'You go. We'll sort this out later, don't worry'.

When mum got really poorly, I dropped a day for less money, because I was run ragged. Running in, making sure she was all right, going to work, coming back, running in with the shopping. I wasn't getting any quality time with her, or any time to assess how she really was.

Then during COVID, while working for adult education we were having yet another restructure. I just couldn't face, the whole form filling, the competition with friends for our jobs was just horrible. Having been through loads of restructures, I was used to the process yet never remember my care responsibilities being a consideration.

Dealing with restructures at work while juggling care was stressful, thinking, 'What job am I going to be able to get with the hours I need?' **There were just too many barriers to reapplying for a job.** It was just like that game, Buckaroo. Mum was needing me more and more and I couldn't deal with yet another restructure on top of that. You had to be 55 before they'd offer volunteer redundancy, so it hadn't been an option until then. So I left and went to university, which meant I could fit Mum in around my lectures and private study. I don't think I could have sustained looking after mum and working for much longer. Obviously, I'm taking on debt. It would have been better if I could have been working all this time, and taken my full pension at the proper time.

When did you identify as a carer?

You don't necessarily see yourself as a carer, because you have to go to work. I just thought that I was looking after my mum and my dad, I never really thought about the word carer. I thought you needed to get Carers Allowance to be classed as a carer. I thought I was just stepping up and doing the right thing. I guess I didn't feel like it needed a title.

It's not because you're this huge philanthropist person looking after people, it's just what you do. My parents needed me. Who else is going to do it?

Only when it gets really serious, do you realise how stressed you are and think, 'Where do I go for help?' I wasn't aware of carers assessments until I worked in the call centre for social services, where I spoke to others like me, who phoned for assessments for those they cared for. It was only then, I thought I should have a carers assessment.

What advice would you give to employers?

Employers need to look out for stress. Despite being present and doing a good job, what's truly going on is you're running on fumes doing it. People don't realise the stresses being on your mind when you're at your desk. I used to feel that, as long as I was in my job it didn't matter how I was feeling.

Working from home would have been great. I could have been working on the laptop at mum's, or just having a portable device, would have meant I could have kept on top of emails. Home working existed for people in different (higher up, better paid) positions, but not me. My job could be done from home, but they didn't put those things in place. It wasn't even suggested until COVID, then they did put it in place.

Did you ever speak to any of your colleagues about care?

I never spoke to colleagues about the help I gave my mum. In fact, I didn't really have anybody in my social life that was doing what I was doing, I felt quite isolated in that way.

There was a carers session I kept seeing advertised at work and thinking, 'I really should go to that,' but it was during lunchtime. It was in a different building, and I didn't have a lunch hour anyway. Even if it had been after work, I had to leave to run to mum's.

Meeting others in a similar position would have helped. If that could have been during the day and I was allowed to go, during work time, that would have been a good thing.

What challenges were there at work?

If mum was taken ill, I would have to take Emergency leave, because you do tend to use up all your annual leave. You could have one day. During that one day, you had to organise something for the second day, or however long it went on. It was very dependent on who my manager was. If it was somebody who had had experience in caring, they would sort it in some way.

Taking time from work is a stress in itself, and you feel guilty. You feel guilty about your colleagues. I never took the mickey, but I think there's a cynicism amongst the non-carers that think, 'She can just clock off whenever she wants to.' But you get that as a parent anyway.

What challenges do you face as a carer?

Being valued

I would say that caring is not taken very seriously in the financial sense. You can't get carers allowance, or anything if you're working. Even if you're not working, it's not enough to live on. If you're working, it's like, 'Well, you don't need it, do you?' But you can only work part-time, otherwise, you'd be on your knees if you worked full time. I don't think it's possible to work full time and look after people.

If you're a working carer who recognises some of the experiences in the story above then contact us today!

Crossroads Care Gloucestershire can support you with adult respite and information about your rights and those you look after.



**Crossroads
Care**
Gloucestershire



Scan the QR code to sign up for our working carer newsletter

For more information or for an informal chat call Jessica on: 01452 933503 or email: workingcarers@crossroadscareglos.org.uk

A Network Partner of
CARERS TRUST

MAKING CARERS COUNT
Working in partnership with Carers Trust