Young Carers Awareness Day: how can we support the mental health of young carers?

Jan 30, 2020

It is estimated that there are around 700,000 young carers in the UK[1] and many young carers have to provide emotional support to family members in need.

Young carers are children and young persons under the age of 18 who provide, or intend to provide, care, assistance or support to another family member who is disabled, physically, or mentally ill. They carry out, often on a regular basis, significant or substantial caring tasks, taking on a level of responsibility that is inappropriate to their age or development.

Due to these responsibilities, young carers miss an average of 48 days of school throughout the year, and 68% have been bullied at some point because of their role in caring for someone[2].

The aging population has led to a massive demand for carers across the UK, leading to an increase in the number of children and young adults who need to care for family members, or others. This Young Carers Awareness Day (30th January 2020), Gavin Bashar, UK Managing Director of Tunstall Healthcare, discusses how the mental health of young carers can be supported and how they can seek support through services and the technology available to them.

Utilise technology

"With many young people facing the huge task of caring for a loved one, a simple way to ease the pressure both physically and mentally is to utilise technology to support both young carers and the people they care for. Telecare is a system of wireless sensors placed around the home, which immediately detect risks such as fires, floods and falls. As soon as a risk is detected by one of the sensors, an alert is sent to a telecare monitoring centre via a central Lifeline home unit using the phone line or mobile network. Experienced operators can then ensure an appropriate response, such as calling the emergency services or their carer.

"Technology like this offers individuals 24/7 person-centred care, and gives young carers the reassurance they need to be able to take some well-deserved 'me time', get a good night's sleep or be able to attend school without feeling anxious or guilty. Young carers can feel safe knowing that the person they're caring for has a means of calling for help when they're elsewhere."

Human interaction is crucial

"Telecare works best when implemented alongside the support of young carers, so it doesn't replace vital human interaction but instead aids young carers struggling to manage the emotional and physical needs of their loved ones. Telecare and telehealth systems have been proven to reduce stress among carers, enabling them to have a life outside of caring – something that is absolutely vital to a young person faced with such responsibility, who might be feeling isolated and less independent.

"However, technology must work alongside human interaction to keep young carers connected. Options include investing in a smartphone or tablet, to help keep in touch with other family members or loved ones. Not only will this reduce loneliness, it also means a young carer is aware that other people are available to them should they need any help or support in fulfilling their role or taking some much needed time out."

Ask for help

"Although many young people cope with caring, especially if they have support from loved ones, it's still important they take care of themselves. There are many organisations across the UK which offer support to children and young adults in this situation. Teachers, school nurses, counsellors and GP's can all offer assistance.

"Most local authorities can also offer guidance on the telecare and technology available to them. Some local councils can even offer a form of community alarm or telecare service. Young carers can also find out by a quick call to their social services department what technology is available in their area, and any associated costs. Some may qualify for free or subsidised services, which should help ease any financial pressures or worries about fulfilling their role they may be facing."