Evidence Review

Improving the Health and Well-being of Care Workers.

Easy read version

# What is the issue?

Care work can be amazing and make a huge difference to people’s lives. However, **without the right support**, it can be a very **difficult** job.A person and person sitting at a table talking

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A person with his arms crossed in front of a crying face

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A lot of care workers are **poorly paid** and find their jobs very **stressful**.

There was a recent study about the **working conditions** and **staff well-being** in social care. They looked at how things changed during the **COVID-19 pandemic**.A group of people looking through a magnifying glass

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They found that before the pandemic, social work had some of the **worst working conditions** of any sector in the UK.A person in blue uniform with different expressions

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Their research showed that these **working conditions have gotten worse** since the pandemic. The mental well-being of the staff has also gotten worse.A group of orange and blue virus cells

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They found that improving staff well-being would be good for the well-being of **employers, social care workers** and for **the people they support.**A group of people standing together

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There was **similar research** done in the **NHS.** They also found that improving staff well-being would be good **for both employers and for patients.**A group of people standing in front of a hospital

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A group of people wearing medical uniforms

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Although they have struggled to make changes to help their staff, the NHS **believes that their staff are very important.**

Some people think that **social care** still has a **long way to go** when it comes to this. A person holding a sign with a green tick and red cross

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# Why is this issue important to us?

A person pointing at a graph

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From our own research, we have found that supporting social care staff is a **very important issue** to people.

A group of people standing around a person in a wheelchair

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When we asked people what projects we should run, lots of people wanted to do **work around staff well-being.**

In early 2023, our ‘Ask IMPACT’ team made a **guide** about **employing social care staff** and making sure they **want to stay in their jobs.** A person holding a clipboard with check marks

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You can read this guide, and watch a video about it on this **website:**A computer with a click on the screen

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<https://impact.bham.ac.uk/our-projects/ask-impact-guides/recruitment-retention-support-answers/>

This guide brought attention to lots of problems. It also showed some ways that employers can **improve things for social care staff.** A person holding a sign with a green tick and red cross

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One example of this is by paying proper attention to the **health and well-being** of people working in social care.A person giving thumbs up

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As a result of this research, we are bringing organisations from across the UK to **work on these issues together.**A map of united kingdom

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A group of people looking at a piece of paper

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We want to share ideas and learn new things from each other so we can think about **how to make a difference.**

# Care as ‘emotional labour’

One new way we can think about these issues is by thinking of care as a form of **‘emotional labour’.** A person touching her face with her hand

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Emotional labour means **managing your own feelings** so that you can act in a **suitable** way at work. A group of women posing for a picture

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An example of this would be a **paramedic staying calm** even when they are in a scary situation, or helping someone who is **badly injured**. A person with her hands on her chest

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A group of people boarding an airplane

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The idea of care as a form of emotional labour started in the **airline industry.**

Air stewards have to present themselves as **professional, calm and friendly** in front of passengers who might be **scared, angry or even abusive.**A person in a black suit

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Similar ideas have also been talked about in health care. For example, **nurses have to be understanding and caring** towards their patients, even when they are stressed.A person comforting a crying person

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This can be really hard in a sector like adult social care, where some things people do can be very **difficult and upsetting.**A person holding her head

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If we get put in really difficult situations **without proper support**, our health and well-being can **suffer** as a result.A person sitting in a chair

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**Yvonne Sawbridge,** who used to be a nurse leader, has used the idea of ‘emotional labour’ in her work with **Alistair Hewison.** A person wearing a badge

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They looked at **why things can go so wrong** in health care and why people that work in health care can sometimes **do awful things** to people. A person holding a clipboard with a pen and x marks

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They wanted to find out how we can support staff to give **‘compassionate care’.** In other words, how to help make sure patients are **treated well.** A person in a red jacket shaking hands with another person in a wheelchair

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Yvonne Sawbridge points out that there is often **too much focus on money** and finances. We sometimes forget how **emotionally difficult** care work can be. A bag full of money

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She gives an example of this from the **ambulance service.** In the past, the ambulance staff used **different ways of coping** with the problems they faced at work.A yellow and green ambulance

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They would use their time in between calls to **talk to each other and make each other laugh.** Two women sitting in chairs

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However, after they introduced something called ‘higher performance targets’ and ‘faster response times’, this meant that they **didn’t have time to chat together** in between calls. A person and person standing next to a stopwatch

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A person with her hand on her head

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As a result, some staff felt **more stressed** and said that they were **getting sick more often.**

This is because they had **lost the support** that they had before and so they found it **harder to cope.**A person with his arms crossed in front of a crying face

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A person in a wheelchair with a white speech bubble

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Many public services seem to be really bad at paying attention to the **emotional impact of caring.**

There are rules in place to keep people **physically safe** at work. For example, people who work on building sites wear **hard hats** to keep themselves safe. A person wearing a safety vest and hard hat

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However, people often forget about taking care of their **emotional well-being.** A person with her hand on her head

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In care work, lots of people think that if you’ve got enough time to think and talk about how you’re feeling, this means you’re **not working hard enough.**A person with his hands out

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This can result in staff **not being properly supported** to give compassionate care to their patients. They are then **blamed for being ‘uncaring’.** A person holding her hand up to a person

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# What does this mean in practice?

Sawbridge and her colleagues held a national workshop. They worked with **nurse leaders** and buddied up with **the Samaritans.** A group of people standing around a person in a wheelchair

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They compared how the Samaritans **support their volunteers** with how the NHS tries to look after its staff. They carried out research and wrote up some **practical ideas.** A person sitting in a wheelchair pointing up

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Here is a list of some examples they found of these ideas being put into practice:A person holding a piece of paper

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A person sitting in a wheelchair with a nurse and a person standing next to her

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* A programme at Southampton University which **taught people how to give compassionate care** to older people in hospital.
* A research project by Edinburgh University and NHS Lothian, which was set up to **find ways of giving compassionate care.**A group of people looking through a magnifying glass

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A person with her hands on her chest

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* **Mindfulness programmes** about reducing stress by Transport for London.
* **Self-care plans** and groups to help people working in emergency services to **deal with stress.** These groups were first made by emergency services in the US.A person holding her head

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* A forum created by the Point of Care Foundation to help staff come together to discuss the **emotional and social parts of caring.**A person shaking hands with another person

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* The Samaritans **Volunteer Support programme**A group of men standing together

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# What did they learn from the Samaritans?

Sawbridge and Hewison worked with NHS nurse leaders to think about the ways the Samaritans **support their volunteers.** A group of people looking at a piece of paper

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A person and person looking at a piece of paper

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They found that one way they did this was by **pairing the volunteers up with a partner** during their training.

They allowed the volunteers to talk **about their calls** with their partner in between calls. Two women sitting in chairs

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If the volunteer **needed more time** to talk things through with their partner, they would **turn the phones off** to allow this to happen. A person talking on the phone

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Although this wasn’t needed very often, it shows how **important the emotional well-being** of the volunteers was to the organisation. A person giving thumbs up

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They believed that if the carer isn’t supported then they **can’t care for their callers.** A person shaking hands with another person

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Two men sitting at a table

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At the end of each shift, the volunteer would talk to their shift leader about **how they are feeling** and the types of calls they had taken that day.

If the shift leader felt that the volunteer was **emotionally affected** by the calls, they would call them up the next day to **ask how they are.**A person and person holding red telephones

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# What barriers did the NHS face when trying to achieve this?

The NHS tried hard to **bring about changes** based on these ideas and attitudes. However, they found that it **wasn’t easy.** A person holding a book

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One of the reasons for this is that they struggled to find the **time and** **space** to give the staff this kind of support. A person touching her face with her hand

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They also found that people felt that they **already looked after one another.** They said they felt **unable to make any actual changes** to the way they did their work. A group of people posing for a photo

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# What can we learn from this?

Hewison and Sawbridge felt that it was important to learn from what **didn’t work well and what did.** They gave the following **advice:**A person shaking hands with another person

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* Any plan to improve staff support and compassionate care needs to be a plan that is **brought about by the organisation.** A group of people looking at a piece of paper

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For example, a **plan made by the NHS** itself, rather than the responsibility of individual workers.A group of people wearing medical uniforms

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* There needs to be **proper support** given by senior management. The **whole team** needs to be on board with this.A group of people posing for a photo

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* There is **no single way** of doing things. Different things will work for different teams. A person with glasses and a blue shirt

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* It is not enough to make one single change. **Real progress** can only be made when people come up with **lots of different ways to change things.**A person pointing at a white board

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# Other resources

There is anonline **blog** you can read titled **‘Care and compassion in the NHS’.** Read it here:A person sitting at a desk with a computer

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<https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/blog/2011/02/care-and-compassion-nhs-patient-experience>

We can also provide a **reference list** for our sources, please message or email if you would like this sent to you. Hands typing on a keyboard

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