

Coaching at Work

“Intensive care”

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To mark Carers Week last month, former carer **Catherine Macadam** looks at how the coaching profession can offer its support

INTENSIVE CARE

We all have reasons to be grateful to carers. We often know one; indeed, many of us may end up being looked after ourselves.

According to Carers UK, carers save the UK taxpayer £119 billion a year. Many carers are elderly or have poor health themselves, but take it for granted that they will care for family members who are ill, frail or disabled. But it is hard, exhausting, lonely and often thankless work, with very little recognition, support or tangible reward.

New research by Carers Trust has shown that “battling on as a carer without support can lead to serious problems in carers’ lives”, having a negative impact on working life, and physical and mental health.

Carers Week last month (18-24 June) had the theme, “In Sickness and in Health”, which resonated for me with *Coaching at Work’s* ‘Coaching for Health’ campaign. The focus was on greater

support for unpaid carers to help them continue their vital role. I believe coaching has much to offer.

Having been a carer myself, I know what it’s like. I was grateful for advice, and for listening and counselling support from my local carers centre, but there were times when I really needed some coaching.

I’m no longer a carer, but I wanted to give something back. So last June I set up a pilot project offering coaching to carers at the City and Hackney Carers Centre. It has proved to be some of the most challenging,

humbling and rewarding work I have done as a coach.

Caring: ‘life’ or ‘work’?

I have always felt rather uncomfortable with the labels we use to describe what we do as coaches, distinguishing between executive/life/career coaching, for example. For carers, caring is their life and their work, which they may be doing on top of other paid or voluntary work.

The coaching I have done has covered issues ranging from personal fulfilment, health and

The reality of being a carer

- On duty up to 24 hours a day – boundaries between ‘life’ and ‘work’ do not apply.
- A difficult, isolated, unsupported situation, in which it is easy to get bogged down. Exhaustion can be physical, mental and emotional, and there are no line managers or colleagues to help manage the load, or give direction or support.
- Constant tensions between different demands on your time. Carers are also parents, partners, friends – and may also have jobs to do.
- Change coming out of the blue, no time to reflect or plan and decision-making that can be fraught with difficulties – practical, financial, emotional, psychological and physical.



Case study: Looking after number one

Mr A, 72, has been caring for his wife, who has MS and heart disease, for 13 years. He came to coaching feeling depressed, negative and unable to relax. His goal was to look after himself, attend to his health and do things for, and by, himself, specifically: exercise, volunteering, relaxation.

Mr A understood the coaching relationship and what to expect, having had previous experience as a mentor. He was very clear about what he wanted to achieve and what had prevented him from moving forward. He was ready to commit to action.

Progress was slow at first, and he seemed to be going round in circles, feeling helpless and discouraged. But he persisted and I could see a real change in his demeanour once things began to happen. He was noticeably upbeat and optimistic about overcoming future problems or hurdles.

We worked on strengths, experience and USP for his CV, volunteering applications and interviews. We also made plans for the future, identifying the support and follow-up he needed.

After five sessions, he had overcome his fear of going to places on his own, he had started and maintained a regular exercise programme, clarified his volunteering offer and made contact with various agencies. This resulted in a job offer.

"It was helpful having to report to someone about progress with work towards my goals and I am more aware of procrastination," he said.

“ We all need carers to carry on caring. Coaching can play an important part in this ”

wellbeing, work and career. At times, it has taken me into the grey area between coaching and counselling.

As a carer, it is easy to lose touch with who you are and what you want or need for a fulfilling life. Although there is a legal requirement for carers to have an assessment of their needs as distinct from those of the person they are caring for, in reality, this is not always offered to or taken up by carers. Even if it is, what's on offer may not be what's needed.

Coaching or counselling?

The UK's national network of carers centres offers services including support groups, training, advice, advocacy and counselling. Is there a need for coaching too? I believe so, and

Azhar Rahman, volunteer and befriending co-ordinator at the City and Hackney Carers Centre, agrees: "Coaching is a niche which fits neatly into the package of services the centre offers, somewhere between counselling and Listening Ear, combining elements of both. But the key factor is its practical application, developing strategies and providing guidance that can make all the difference to successfully attaining goals which have seemed unreachable for so long."

At monthly supervision meetings I discuss cases with the volunteer counsellors. While there are some clear differences between our training, approaches and emphasis, there are probably more similarities between coaching and counselling

than differences in terms of what our clients experience.

Emma Light, counsellor at the carers centre, says: "The differences between coaching and what I do as a counsellor, working in a person-centred, humanistic way, are less obvious than people might think. By offering both coaching and counselling, we are extending our offer to clients by making it easier for them to get help in ways that make sense to them."

For example, five of the eight coaching clients are men, whereas the majority of counselling clients are women. By offering coaching we are enabling more male carers to access help than were being reached by the counselling offer.

We all need carers to carry on caring. Coaching can play an important part in this. 'Coaching for Health' is a great opportunity for us as coaches to make a difference, but how can we make its benefits available to people who need it, not just those who can afford it?

Some 95 per cent of respondents to *Coaching at Work's* 'Coaching the Community' survey thought it was important to make a contribution to the wider community through their work; 49 per cent were doing it pro bono. Long may it last. But this is presumably happening ad hoc, without co-ordination, prioritisation or evaluation. Is it enough to rely on goodwill?

If we could persuade those who control the purse strings of the value of paying coaches to work with carers, we could make a positive contribution to the government's stated aim of developing "a range of support options and opportunities to match the diverse needs of carers and the outcomes they wish to achieve in their lives". ■

● **Catherine Macadam** is a coach/mentor and consultant

www.cmacadam.co.uk