

Take care

Not everyone's a natural caregiver – and that's okay

Caregiving is a personal quality that's almost universally lauded. During times of crisis, it's something people learn to appreciate. Think of how frontline workers, especially medical staff working with Covid patients, were applauded at the start of the pandemic. Think of those caregivers, too, who rarely receive public acclaim, but deserve it nevertheless for choosing such a path – the foster parents who provide a safe harbour for traumatised kids, the faith leader or counsellor who offers balm in troubled times. In your own life, you probably know a few people who radiate care – the friend who provides a shoulder for your tears, the family member who's reliable with hugs and tea, the colleague who remembers your birthday and goes the extra mile to buy you something heartfelt and personal.

Natural caregivers rarely receive public appreciation. In fact, they're often taken for granted. Perhaps this is because the quality of caregiving is something many people feel they ought to have. Agreeableness is one of the generally accepted 'big five' basic personality traits, and is seen to manifest as altruism, kindness and care. At the other end of the scale is disagreeableness, manifesting in socially unpleasant behaviour. I know which end of the scale I'd rather be on.

False equation

However, there's an assumption that travels alongside the agreeableness trait, and it's this: if you're a decent human being, you must be a natural caregiver. And if you're not one, then you must be uncaring, selfish and a nasty piece of work. That equation isn't true. Yet it's embedded so deep that it can propel people to exhibit inauthentic behaviour. If you play the part of an others-focused soul because you believe you ought to be one, you're likely to find it exhausting and could even burn out. On the other hand, being honest about your limits and abilities, while acknowledging there are many ways to be an agreeable person, can be liberating.

I should know. I'm not a natural caregiver, yet because I believed that it made me a selfish person, I did my best to overcome my perceived lack by doing good things. Every time I slipped up – or thought I did – I'd give myself a spell on the naughty step, where I reflected on what I ought to have done and how I'd go about changing myself for next time.

Ruth Micallef, a trauma specialist in Edinburgh, Scotland, is unsure whether the state of natural caregiving even exists. 'I actually think it's a learned skill,' she says. 'Like empathy and resilience... We're taught to be caregivers through experiences, such as being a parent.'

Natural or not, some people seem more adept at it than others. If that's you, your instincts might propel you to provide care, with no cognition involved. You don't weigh up the right thing to do or ponder whether a card, flowers or a hug would be more appropriate: you just do it. You're energised by helping others: by opening your home to strangers or cooking for anyone who happens to stop by. Importantly, you don't need praise for your caregiving and you don't do it to make yourself feel less of a bad person. It's your dharma. It might feel as if that's what you were put on Earth to do.

Finding a balance

If you are that way, I celebrate and admire you – because you're a rare breed. But maybe you're not like that, yet feel you ought to be, and this is what drives your behaviour. Perhaps you have all your friends' birthdays marked on a calendar because you're afraid that, if you don't remember them, they'll realise what a supposedly terrible person you really are. Or maybe you freeze when faced with a crisis because you're trying to work out what a 'good' person would do rather than what you need to do.

At the extreme, you might overcompensate everywhere. To others, your life might look like one of the adept caregiver. But what happens if your aim to put others' needs before your own means you get lost in the process? Ruth talks about a coping mechanism she calls 'compliant surrender' that often begins in childhood. 'It's a coping mode that means we don't get our own needs met,' she says. 'Compliant surrender is probably seen as the pinnacle of the "natural caregiver". And I'm not convinced this is healthy.' If you're doing this, you might burn out. Ruth says you could end up 'unheard, unseen, resentful and angry'. The answer, she says, is all about 'balance, balance, balance... ensure that your needs, whatever they are, are still being met... make sure you do activities which promote that.'

Of course, not being a natural caregiver is no guarantee you won't be an actual carer, or that it won't take its toll, however





appropriate the role feels. There are an estimated 10.58 million unpaid carers in the UK. Of these, almost half are worried about the impact of caring for loved ones on their physical or mental health. 'Caring fatigue is a phrase we hear a lot,' says Aaron Dryden, director of carer support at Carers UK, an organisation that exists to make life better for unpaid carers. Even if, as he says, caregiving might feel a natural fit, burnout is common all the same: 'It can almost be like a resource that runs dry at some point.'

Seeking help

What happens, he says, is that 'people lose an idea and a sense of who they are, particularly if it's quite all-encompassing'. The first thing to do, he suggests, is 'reach out for help with the caring role, via your GP or social services department'. There are also carer support groups and talking therapies, along with Carers UK for resources.

It shouldn't need saying, but it does, that most in these roles didn't choose this as their life path and the qualities needed are not necessarily innate. But that ought to be more reason to celebrate the people involved. 'Just because care doesn't come naturally to you, if there's no alternative but to provide that care, you can approach it reluctantly and still be great at it,' says Aaron. 'You just maybe need to think of yourself a bit more and consider the support you need and where to get that support from.'

I've been one of these people and, through it, I learned my truth and my strength. The truth is that caregiving doesn't

come naturally or easily to me. Yet my strength is that I have other skills which I can bring to the role. I've learned that caring is not the same as caregiving and that caring can be expressed in many ways. Even if you're not an unpaid carer, but someone who aims to put other people first, you might still burn out in the process. So perhaps it's time to acknowledge and celebrate the fact that you might not be a born caregiver. It's a personality trait assigned to few – if any. You're one of many, and all those supposed slip-ups you make are manifestations of a greater truth – not that you don't care, but that you show you do in your own way.

Be yourself

In fact, you have a great number of gifts to offer the world, if not necessarily hugs or tea. And that's as it should be. It's in playing to your strengths (see panel, opposite), and behaving in ways that are natural for you, that you'll discover a well of resilience you may never have known was there. So, remember, being a non-natural caregiver is not a character flaw, it's just character.

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Follow more of Stephanie's thoughts on Twitter @StephanieLam and Instagram @Stephanie_Lam_1

For advice, information and support, visit Contact Carers UK at carersuk.org

HOW TO SHOW YOUR CONCERN

Want to support a loved one going through a tough time, but have no idea what to do? Try the following

Communicate with them. If you're able to reach out, remember that your communication doesn't have to be perfect. It can be basic – even a text to say 'Thinking of you and sending love' is better than silence. It's a small way that you can show care – and delaying while you agitate over the appropriate message or medium won't help them or you. Circumstances might mean they won't acknowledge or reply to your communication, and that's okay.

Ask them what they need. If you're in the position of caring for a loved one, ask them what they need. 'It sounds incredibly obvious,' says Aaron, 'but often, if people aren't intuitive carers, they can find themselves providing what they think somebody needs, rather than asking and deciding with somebody what they can do. That sort of discussion is important.' State your question plainly. Don't text 'Let me know if there's any way I can help?' unless you're just being polite and have no intention of offering any help. Ask directly: 'What do you need?'

Set boundaries. Recognise what you're less able to do – whether that's related to your time, finances or abilities as a caregiver. Your own care needs might also mean you're less able at this moment to provide optimal care to others. Boundaries are healthy, and it's okay to set them. If there's an option to say 'No' or 'Not now', acknowledge that it won't make you a bad person to do so.

Play to your strengths. 'Caring takes a lot of different forms. And people with a wide range of skills can apply them to caring as well,' says Aaron. 'Play to your strengths to support them, in a way which works for you.' Ruth agrees, suggesting you ask yourself: 'What can I do in my own way to show care?' She suggests that if the 'emotional door' isn't your thing, then perhaps the physical or mental door might be the strength you can use. You might not be great with hugs, but you're brilliant at practical help. You might be less hands-on, but you're an ace problem solver. You'll have strengths that can be used to show your care, if that feels right to you.

