

Understanding the potential factors affecting carers' mental health during end-of-life home care: a meta synthesis of the research literature

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Disclosure of interests

Full disclosure of interests: Completed ICMJE forms for all authors, including all related interests, are available in the toolkit on the NIHR Journals Library report publication page at <https://doi.org/10.3310/EKVL3541>.

Primary conflicts of interest: none.

Published December 2022

DOI: 10.3310/EKVL3541

Plain language summary

Carers' mental health during end-of-life home care

Health and Social Care Delivery Research 2022

DOI: 10.3310/EKVL3541

NIHR Journals Library www.journalslibrary.nihr.ac.uk

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Background

Family carers give vital support to people nearing the end of life, but their own mental health may suffer as a result. We need to understand what improves or worsens carers' mental health to support them appropriately and help them stay in good health.

Aim

To pull together what is known about what can affect carers' mental health during end-of-life caregiving.

Method

We identified research from 2009 to 2019 that looked at factors that may make carers' mental health better or worse when supporting someone nearing the end of life. We focused on adult carers of adult patients cared for at home. We were supported by a carer Review Advisory Panel.

Results

Findings from the 106 studies we identified were grouped into seven themes or factors that were positive or negative to carers' mental health: (1) how the patient was (better patient mental health and quality of life were positive); (2) how much caregiving affected carers' lives (greater impact, burden and difficulty of tasks were negative); (3) relationships (good relationships between family members and between carer and patient seemed positive); (4) finance (having insufficient resources seemed negative); (5) carers' internal processes (carers' thoughts and feelings) (feeling confident about caregiving was positive); (6) support (good support from family and friends and getting sufficient, satisfactory support from formal services was positive); and (7) background factors (older carers may have better mental health, and female carers worse mental health).

Conclusions

Practitioners, commissioners and policy-makers must consider how they together can address the range of factors that may affect carers' mental health. Researchers must do more work on finances, relationships, ethnicity, race and culture; find out more about why and how factors affect carers' mental health; and focus on aspects of factors that matter to carers, rather than what is easy to research.