

Looking after someone? Take time to care for yourself too

How do you like to spend your weekends? Relaxing, spending time with friends and family or enjoying a hobby where you can forget the stresses and strains of life.

Sadly for many of the 788,000 unpaid carers in Scotland, 29,000 of whom are young carers, weekends aren't always quite as relaxing.

Caring for a friend or family member can be a full-time job. The reality for many carers is that they're so busy with helping the person they care for to wash and get dressed, picking up prescriptions, arranging appointments and picking up groceries that they have little time for themselves.

Unpaid caring is a key issue of our time and something that affects people of all ages and backgrounds.

Scotland's ageing population, with people living longer with multiple health conditions, means that it's only going to become more common for people to take on a caring role at some point in their lives.

Caring responsibilities can understandably take a toll on the carer's health and wellbeing. It's important that carers take the time to look after themselves too as if you're not taking care of yourself then taking care of others is much harder.

One of the best things that carers can do for themselves is to stay active. As well as helping to prevent

and manage a range of health conditions, being active can also relieve stress, improve mood, encourage clear thinking and allow them to meet new people. For young carers looking after a sibling or parent, it allows them to enjoy their childhood and forget about their caring responsibilities.

Being active doesn't need to mean running a marathon or joining a boot camp. Going for a brisk walk around the block, cycling short journeys instead of driving and doing online exercise classes are simple ways that carers can get active in their own time.

At Edinburgh Leisure, a charity on a mission to help everyone in Edinburgh to lead happier, healthier and more active lives, they are proud to provide support to people in the community who face barriers to being active, including carers, through a range of initiatives designed to protect and improve their health and wellbeing.

They recognise that caring can take its toll financially, with a recent study estimating that over 300,000 people in Scotland have had to quit their job to care for a relative, so are committed to allowing carers to access their sports and leisure facilities for free when accompanying the person they care for. Their carers go free policy means that if they want to swim alongside them or attend a yoga class together, they only pay for the cost of the person they care for.

Carers can also benefit from Edinburgh Leisure's Community Access Programme, which supports community groups and charities to make physical activity more accessible for the people they work with. They've partnered with two local carer organisations, Vocal and Edinburgh Young Carers, to give carers access to their city-wide facilities without worrying about the cost.

Through the Community Access Programme, they deliver weekly swimming lessons for young carers at Portobello Swim Centre. Since they started in late 2017, nearly 30 young carers have learned to swim.

Tina Hedley of the Edinburgh Young Carers said: 'The young carers we work with don't have the same opportunities to be active as their peers. Before starting swimming lessons, many of them had never been to a swimming pool before and were frightened of getting in the water.

'As well as teaching them to swim, the lessons have helped them to improve their mental wellbeing, become more confident and learn an important life skill. It has been incredible to watch them find something they enjoy and look forward to each week. Last summer we took them on a day trip to North Berwick and they couldn't wait to swim in the sea and show off their new skills.'

If you are a carer and would like more information on how Edinburgh Leisure can support you, contact Phil Trodden at philtrodden@edinburghleisure.co.uk or 0131 548 2100.

