

Wellbeing Writing with Rashmi Becker MBE, Step Change Studios



Still from the film 'Conversations with Carers'. Photographer credits: Daniel Lowenstein; John Trigg.

Conversations with Carers

[Watch the trailer here.](#)

WHAT IS CONVERSATIONS WITH CARERS AND HOW DID IT COME ABOUT?

There are 7 million carers in the UK and 3 in 5 of us will become carers at some point in our lives. *Conversations with Carers* explores the lived experience of paid and unpaid carers, many of whom also work in the arts, through a series of [podcasts](#) and [articles](#). These conversations have also inspired 5 short dance films performed by disabled and non-disabled artists. The project is supported using public funding by Arts Council England.

I have been having professional and personal conversations with carers throughout my adult life. I understand the realities of care work – both on the frontline, having worked in social care, and at home, growing up in a family with a severely disabled older brother. I also regularly come into contact with carers through my inclusive dance work.

My life experience has provided an interesting and polarising perspective on care. On the one hand, I find it outrageous that so many carers have to fight for basic rights for people they support; on the other hand, I am acutely aware of the unacceptable working conditions

and low value of care work that make it near impossible to provide adequate support. This perspective has led me to question how it can be possible to advocate for the health and wellbeing of people we support, while also safeguarding the health and wellbeing of carers.

During the pandemic, the isolation, stress and poor treatment of carers was magnified. I started sharing my experiences with other carers. The conversations I was having fuelled further frustration at the lack of visibility and honest representation in society of the experience of carers. I was especially struck by how many colleagues in the arts were also carers. This motivated me to create *Conversations with Carers*, which aims to connect care, compassion and creativity by giving voice and artistic expression to carers.

HOW HAVE YOU FOUND THE EXPERIENCE OF PRODUCING THIS WORK?

I have found this project tremendously rewarding, thought-provoking and moving. Having the time, space and most importantly the permission to talk honestly is critical for carers. I have especially valued speaking with colleagues in the arts and hearing about their lives as carers and how this has informed and impacted their creative values and work.

In the podcasts and articles, carers talk about frequently suppressing their own emotions as they prioritise the needs of people they support. Many carers reflect on the low value that society places on caring. They talk about feeling invisible, and the physical, emotional, and financial strains that can become overwhelming.

During my conversations, one carer thought she will never recover from caring for her mother; a young carer spoke of having had to grow up quickly, at the age 10, to support his younger disabled brother; and a frontline carer reflected on leaving her work in a care home as a result of the distress she experienced at the height of the pandemic. All three carers have juggled their responsibilities with their careers in the arts.

WHAT ROLE HAS DANCE PLAYED IN THIS MULTI-DISCIPLINARY PROJECT?

Taking the words and themes from my conversations with carers and expressing them artistically through dance has been a hugely positive experience. Each dance film begins with the words of carers, and many carers from this work talked about the creative stimulus and release that dance allows them. Dance can provide an alternative, non-verbal form of expressing emotion and experience and can connect people with issues that might otherwise be challenging to communicate.

I am especially encouraged by the response from the care sector to this work; as the Chair of one national care organisation said: 'my favourite aspect of your work is the dance and performance art, which graphically illustrates the emotions, challenges and rewards of caring'. *Conversations with Carers* is ultimately about the voices of carers and to have such positive engagement in the role of the arts in amplifying this is rewarding.

WHAT ARE YOUR HOPES FOR THIS WORK?

I hope that *Conversations with Carers* will encourage more people to acknowledge the realities of care work, and that it will help make the case for change in the way we treat, support and recognise carers.

For the dance sector, I hope both on an individual and organisational level, there will be greater recognition of, and support for the care roles that so many colleagues are having to balance with their professional work – whether supplementing their income through working in the care sector, or as unpaid family carers.

Lastly, many people with existing disabilities or long-term conditions also take on caring responsibilities. According to Carers UK, 72% of carers say they had suffered mental ill health, and 61% say physical ill health as a result of caring. *Conversations with Carers* challenges traditional notions of dependency and highlights our interdependency. This concept is critical in challenging the stigma and isolation surrounding care work and in creating better conditions for all carers.

I am grateful to the carers and artists that have been part of *Conversations with Carers* and who have spoken honestly and openly about their experiences.

- Every day another 6,000 people take on a caring responsibility
- 1.4 million people provide over 50 hours of unpaid care per week
- 58% of carers are women
- Over 1 million people care for more than one person
- Half of working age carers live in a household where no-one is in paid work
- 1.2 million carers are in poverty in the UK
- Care provided unpaid by the nations' carers is worth an estimated £132bn per year

Source: *Carers UK*

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