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Distance Caregiving:

How can we provide help and care for loved ones from a geographical distance?

The nursing and health scientist and president of the association rethinking care (Switzerland) explored this question on June 4 as part of the 9th event in the “CAREseiten zeigen”- series organized by the UniKid-UniCare network. 75 interested and affected persons, mostly female, some in leadership positions, participated in the event, which was simultaneously interpreted into sign language as well as into English this time. In a live survey at the beginning of the event, over 40 people indicated that they supported loved ones due to illness, accident consequences, or old age who lived up to 8 hours or more away from them. More than two-thirds of them mainly provided emotional support and assistance with research and decision-making. Many also managed the administration or organization of treatments from a distance. And according to Iren Bischofberger, these "managerial" and "emotional care"-services are central aspects of "Distance Caregiving," a concept in which the term "care" is broader than just "manual" work, and in which on-site and tele-care are interwoven.

After guiding her audience through an impressive journey of images reflecting many aspects of caring for relatives from a distance, Iren Bischofberger turned to the particular challenge of enabling communicative participation through technical tools. The path to IT competence needs to be further paved, and awareness of this should also be strengthened within the healthcare system, especially in times when medical progress is advancing rapidly, people are living longer even with (e.g., degenerative) diseases or accident consequences, and becoming increasingly mobile. However, as the expert explained, this awareness is only developing slowly, with "a lot of regulation but little innovation" in this regard. A strong local network is of course also helpful in managing distance caregiving. In her presentation, she highlighted specific challenges and solutions for the various "target groups" at universities. A particular barrier in caring for relatives are persistent stereotypes, such as gender-based expectations regarding the division of caregiving tasks. According to Iren Bischofberger, universities in particular, as innovative teaching institutions, have a mission to raise awareness of this issue and contribute to breaking down these stereotypes, not only to relieve the burden on their employees and students affected. It is also important to mobilize the "secondary target group," leaders and HR managers, to share their own experiences as distance caregivers and make their expertise available. The university could look beyond its own scope, establish networks (also internationally), and create special offers which, in addition to case/care management and childcare centers, could also include new forms of care such as "senior day care centers." in cooperation with health services. During the vivid discussion at the end of the event, the participants repeatedly expressed the wish that the university should enable teleworking from abroad and that the university leadership should be open and sensitive to the issue of care (e.g. with regard to resilience). Universities could also be sensitized to the fact they can benefit from the many soft skills that carers working and studying at their institution bring with them. In the final Mentimeter survey, there was a lot of positive feedback on the presentation.

The next “Care Seiten zeigen” event will take place on October 15, 2024 with the topic “Children/adolescents and mental illness” (only in German and sign language)