



Self-Care for Caregivers

FAST FACTS

WHAT IS SELF-CARE?

According to the Oxford Dictionary, self-care is “the practice of taking an active role in protecting one's own well-being and happiness, in particular during periods of stress”. Self-care is important for everyone but is especially important for those caring for children who have been exposed to trauma. On airplanes, caregivers are explicitly told to put on their own oxygen masks before putting on someone else's. It's important to recognize that self-care is a selfless act that allows caregivers to continue caring for others, because one can't give water from an empty well. Self-care is more than bubble baths (although bubble baths can be great!) and encompasses mind, body, and spirit.

WHY IS SELF-CARE IMPORTANT?

Bearing witness to the stories of the children in your care can result in secondary (or vicarious) trauma, which mimics the symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Secondary trauma exposure without self-care can result in ‘compassion fatigue’ which makes therapeutic parenting (and navigating life in general!) very challenging.

In addition to secondary trauma, many caregivers experience direct/first-hand trauma due to parenting the behaviors that may present as a result of in-utero exposure, trauma, and/or neglect. Caregivers own grief/loss/trauma history may be triggered. In short, without self-care, one can go from parenting someone with PTSD to managing their own PTSD very quickly. Healed people heal people!

Humans need to experience co-regulation before being able to self-regulate. Self-care is important so that caregivers can offer themselves as that regulating partner. Regulation is a learned ability to calm oneself in times of stress. Dysregulated caregivers often inadvertently support the negative world views of the kids in their care. Detailed crisis plans and a variety of therapeutic parenting “tools” in one's toolbox can prevent the feelings of powerlessness that negatively impact an ability to care for self and others. Children learn how to cope partially through watching their caregivers cope. Saying “I'm going to take care of myself so that I can take care of you” is a great model!

WHAT DOES SELF-CARE LOOK LIKE?

Self-care looks different for everyone, and for those in the trenches, it often needs to be ‘small things often’ vs. large or elaborate changes that may feel overwhelming to implement. Trauma can trick caregivers into ‘all or nothing’ thinking. It's important to remember that some self-care is better than no self-care.

Nakita Valerio said that “shouting ‘self-care’ at people who actually need ‘community care’ is how we fail people”. Self-care must include community support. That might include things like individual/couples therapy for parents, attending in-person or online support groups, reaching out to MN ADOPT’s HELP program, enlisting a professional to assist in ‘fighting battles’ against schools or other systems, or asking for specific needs to be met by friends/family, such as respite or occasional meals. Find people with whom you can vent without having to explain yourself, educate about trauma, defend the kids in your care, or experience judgement.

Often, the process of intentionally doing something for self-care is more important than the actual act itself. It’s vital to schedule self-care, big or small, into the calendar and stick to it just like all the other appointments on the schedule. For some people, this means scheduling something as simple as a 5-minute break over lunch to listen to an uplifting or calming song or taking a short walk. Self-care doesn’t have to be long or complicated. It does have to be intentional. Self-care and numbing (via substances, purposely staying busy, social media scrolling, etc.) are two very different things.

STRATEGIES FOR SELF-CARE

Physiological needs are the base of the hierarchy of needs, and this is a great place to start. Sleep is critical, and positive sleep hygiene may include: early bedtime for kids to allow time to unwind, limited screen time before bed, avoiding caffeine in the afternoon/evening, maintaining a bedtime that allows adequate sleep (most adults need 7-9 hours), getting exercise during the day, keeping the bedroom dark, and/or using white noise to reduce hyper-vigilance. Healthy eating can greatly impact mood, and mindfully putting fruits/vegetables or water into your body is an act of self-care. Mindfully taking sips of ice water or hot tea during the day can create a mini ‘respite’ even in the midst of chaos. Movement and exercise have a very significant impact on mood. Even 10 minutes a day can be beneficial to one’s feeling of well-being. This can be done with or without kids – take a run/walk, go for a bike ride, search for a yoga video on YouTube, or take a few minutes to do push-ups. Check in with your body...where are you holding tension?

Learning to use deep breathing is one of the greatest tools for self-care, as it’s always available to you. Your breath is key to regulating your nervous system and breathing strategies are supported by neuroscience! Breathe in deeply through your nose and exhale through your mouth, slowly, all the way out. Consider searching ‘deep breathing’ or ‘mindfulness’ online for strategies and practice every day, even if your only opportunity is in the bathroom!

Remember, saying ‘yes’ to yourself sometimes means saying ‘no’ to others. Boundaries are vital. One of the symptoms of traumatic stress is an exaggerated sense of responsibility, but you are not responsible for everything and everyone. It may be helpful to enlist an ‘accountability partner’ to help create and stick to boundaries. Many people find therapy beneficial to exploring boundaries, and there are great resources online.

Often, caregivers experience a loss of identity outside of caregiving. What hobbies did you enjoy prior to caregiving? Do social events fill you up or drain you? When was the last time you spent time in nature? What are you grateful for, and where can that be shared? If you are in a partnership, how can you nurture that relationship together? Is there something on your calendar you are looking forward to? In addition to surrounding yourself with people who understand the challenges of caregiving, is it possible to create/re-establish relationships with people where other topics are discussed? What small thing can you do today to actively care for yourself? “Self-care is not an expense, it’s an investment.” -unknown

RESOURCES

Book on secondary trauma: Trauma Stewardship: An Everyday Guide to Caring for Self While Caring for Others (Laura van Dernoot Lipsky with Connie Burk)

Book to increase therapeutic parenting tools: The A to Z of Therapeutic Parenting (Sarah Naish)

App: Headspace App: Insight Timer

Advocacy assistance with schools: www.pacer.org

MN Adopt HELP program: <https://www.mnadopt.org/help-prog/>

Parent to Parent Support groups, in person and online: <https://www.nacac.org/connect>

Information presented by:



Ann Kent is a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist and Co-Owner at Room to Grow Therapy and Consulting LLC in Annandale, MN. She brings her personal experience navigating the foster care and adoption worlds into her clinical practice, and understands the complexity of parenting children who have experienced trauma. Ann believes deeply that disrupted attachment occurs in the context of a relationship, and therefore should be healed in the context of a relationship. Ann is passionate about supporting caregivers in working through their own grief/loss/trauma in order to best support the children in their care through their healing process.