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COVID 19: WELLBEING AND SELF CARE RESOURCES FOR CARERS AND PRACTITIONERS

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The Martin James Foundation is committed to promoting the wellbeing, rights and interests of children and families around the world. The Covid-19 crisis has not only impacted on people's physical health but with social distancing and lockdown it has also affected many people's mental health and emotional wellbeing. This briefing explores the importance of self-care for parents and carers, whilst outlining some 'top-tips' and helpful resources that can be accessed online. We recognise that not all parents and carers will have access to digital resources. Therefore, we urge practitioners to consider sharing these ideas and promote self-care to the people they support.

Carers may also be coping with limited social networks at this time so it would be good practice for fostering services to consider ways to support their carers so that they can find some time for themselves as soon as this is possible. It is important to acknowledge that with the myriad challenges impacting families and foster carers at this time, self-care alone will not be the answer to the wide range of psycho-social stressors many people are facing.

In the context of lockdown, it is also vital we look out for each other and care for those people around us, our friends, families, and community. However, it should not be an either-or scenario and it is important to remember that self-care practices in their varying forms can offer people an important space to focus, process emotions and better cope with the stress of these uncertain times.



What is self-care?

Self-care is a broad term that can include physical, emotional, cognitive, social, and spiritual aspects of your life. Melody Beattie explains that, "self-care means learning to love the person we're responsible for taking care of—ourselves." To put it simply self-care is about recognising that caring for self is about personal responsibility. There are fundamentals to caring for oneself that on the most basic level include drinking when you're thirsty, eating when you are hungry, resting when you are tired, and connecting with people when you're lonely. Self-care is personal to each individual and can range from a variety of activities and interests. The point is that you experience a meaningful engagement with yourself that helps you feel connected and cared for, by yourself.

Why is self-care important for carers and practitioners?

We know from our practice experiences that those in the helping professions can sometimes focus on supporting others whilst neglecting the need to care for themselves. At times parents and carers can also neglect their own needs to prioritise their care for children. Foster Carers are often expected to engage in Therapeutic Parenting, which requires a deeply nurturing approach. This requires self-awareness and an ability to recognise and understand their own emotions. In this context it is vitally important to look after one's self to be able to undertake the role affectively.

Parents and carers know all too well the rewards of looking after children and young people. From their first steps, to first words and then on to passing their school exams! However, even without the stress of a global pandemic caring for children and young people is challenging. The complexities of supporting children through developmental stages coupled with some of the harsh realities of the human experience, is tough work!

Foster Parents can often be faced with additional stress factors of supporting children who may have experienced trauma. Parents and carers can experience burnout, especially when they are having

to prioritise children's needs over their own. Accordingly, it is important (especially for foster carers) to recognize the signs of experiencing secondary traumatic stress. For example, feeling mentally, emotionally and physically depleted. When parents and carers feel this way, without support and care it can mean a decline in empathy, understanding and general positivity towards the child.

Children's needs demand a response, their very survival depends on attentive parenting. In this context it may seem selfish to spend time looking after yourself. But self-care is not selfish, it is necessary and conducive to positive parenting. As the saying goes you cannot pour from an empty cup! You must take care of yourself so you can take care of others. Focusing some intentional effort on self-care helps to maintain energy levels, mental health and general wellbeing.

Top-Tips

- **Take time out for you:** Enjoy a relaxing bath (with bubbles & candles), cook your favourite food, take time to read your favourite book, enjoy a lie-in or early night in bed, go for a short walk to get some fresh air and clear your thoughts
- **Care for yourself as if you are responsible for a child:** Prioritising the care of a child is an innate response for many parents and carers, remember that you have a responsibility to care for you also.
- **Practicing of daily rituals:** Some faith-based practices include devoting space for daily rituals to reflect. There are also secular practices too where people commit to daily routines that include mindfulness/meditation, yoga and exercise.
- Develop your **self-awareness**- try to find space to reflect on ways to tune into our own needs and not neglect them in the pursuit of caring for others.
- **Know when to seek help:** Sometimes asking for help can be our greatest resource, realizing you need help and asking for it is a sign of resilience. A key part of self-care is being prepared to ask for support and not seeing it as a weakness in doing so.
- **Promote independent play:** Organising independent play for children can be a helpful way to '**take time for you**'. It also has benefits for promoting children's developmental cognitive functions.
- **Plan Self-Care into children's routines:** Lots of children thrive with a routine, take advantage of this by planning some **You-Time** that works with their routine. You may choose to do this during afternoon nap times, or when you put the children to bed. But be mindful that if your child does not nap that day that you find another space dedicated to self-care.
- **Healthy eating:** the phrase 'you are what you eat' has some real value. Making sure you stay well hydrated and eat three good meals a day makes a difference for energy levels and mental/emotional health.
- **Give yourself a break:** Parents told us in the drafting of this paper that they place a lot of pressure on themselves. Be realistic about what can be achieved and try not to put unnecessary pressure on yourself.
- **Celebrate achievements:** However big or small, doing this helps gain and maintain a positive perspective.
- **Stay connected:** Talk to friends, family, and other parents. Being a parent or carer can be very isolating (especially at times like this) it is important to have and access your support network.

Suggested Resources

How you care for your self is a decision for you to make, what works for one person will be different for another. Do not feel bad if you are box set binger if that works for you and it provides some relaxation and escape! It is also important to challenge any assumptions that lockdown and social distancing means everyone miraculously has more time on their hands and that now is the time for taking up new hobbies and interests. We know from parents and carers that is just not the case. We know for some people that these ideas may have to wait until the schools reopen! That said, we have drawn together a range of suggested resources and activities below that we hope you find beneficial.

Mindfulness/Meditation and Yoga, provides a space to focus and relax, with a range of physical and psychological benefits. There are a wide range of mobile phone apps, YouTube links and podcasts that offer guided meditations and yoga. The following apps are designed to make meditation, yoga and self-help tools accessible to everyone. Lots of them are free with the option to pay a fee for extended user experiences: **Headspace**, **Calm**, **Grateful**, **STREAKS**, **Shine**, **10% Happier**, **Glo** and **Insight Timer** which is completely **FREE**. If you have any interest in Yoga a good place to start is a 14 day free trial with the **Yoga Studio: Mind & Body**. Featuring top teachers, 1000s of videos and new content daily for all Levels. Or you could **try 30-Days of Yoga free on YouTube**. There is also a **CBT-Thought Diary** that is a Mood Tracker, Journal & Recording app offers some tool to promote mental well-being.

Online Courses: Coursera offer a wide range of **FREE**

Online courses Varying from IT, sociology, psychology, food and health just to name a few!

Book Clubs: Books can help escape, reading helps to unwind and recharge whilst providing strength and encouragement during difficult times. For book lovers there are online communities of like-minded readers to connect to and share your interests through online book clubs! In this article by **Scribendi** they have reviewed 7 of the best online book clubs for your choosing, enjoy!

Podcasts: Are a great way to follow your interests and also some entertainment whilst getting a break from screen time. Android central have written an article outlining the '**Best Podcast app- 2020**'. Or for an Apple iPhone you can **download Apple Podcasts FREE**, which Stream over 750,000 shows with over 20 million episodes.

Playing a Musical Instrument: Music can be a relaxing past time that enables you to focus your attention on the present and. Learning a musical instrument is now much more accessible with online learning resources. JoyTunes has written a useful blog that **outlines 16 Resources for Learning an Instrument on Your Own**

Creative Writing & Journaling: Creative writing can be a useful method to explore and release emotions. Nicola Monaghan who is a published novelist has devised a YouTube video outlining the **five top-tips to get started in creative writing**. Great Courses Plus also offer a **Free 14-day trial in Creative Writing**.

Arts & Crafts can be a therapeutic activity for many people and **studies have shown** that the levels of cortisol (the stress-related hormone) are lowered when we spend time being creative. There are many online communities to access and the British artist Grayson Perry has recently developed **an art club on Channel four** in the UK to encourage creativity during the lockdown.

Useful Self Care Resources

The **Power of Self-Care** in Parenting: A Gift to Your Entire Family. **Sign up for FREE** and you will receive access to Subscriber downloads.

Dr. Samantha Busa discusses '**why parents should take care of themselves**'. She provides tips to implement self-care into their hectic lives.

Melody Beaty is a writer in self-care, love and compassion. She has worked and written lots in Co-dependency and supporting families who have lived with an addicted person. Her book '**Playing It by Heart: Taking Care of Yourself No Matter What**'. Available in Kindle, hardcover and audio book.

Self-Care for the Breastfeeding Mother tips for Nutrition, Weight Loss, Exercise, Breast Care, and Emotional Health.

Foster Talk provides lots of online learning and support to Foster Carers through membership.

The Association for Postnatal Illness (APNI) is a network of phone and postal volunteers who have had – and recovered from – postnatal depression. For outside of the UK – you can contact Postpartum Support International (PSI) on the following website: www.postpartum.net

The Online Recovery College offer a self-care page with advice and guidance and access to further resources.

A discussion on **Self-Care and resilience** by Neil Thompson- Social Care author, educator and practitioner.

TalkOut MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES list Whether you're concerned about yourself or a loved one, these resources can offer expert support and advice.



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