



The Fostering Communities programme

Briefing paper: Self-care for foster carers

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Purpose of this paper

This paper will provide a short overview of the important, but often overlooked need for self-care amongst foster carers. Foster carers lead busy lives and it can often feel there is not enough time in the day, but self-care is vital. Living with and meeting the needs of children with adverse experiences is very demanding. Becoming a therapeutic parent and behaviour detective is not easy and, so often, the foster carers response is to try harder, to give more, and to think of their own wellbeing needs as a luxury they simply don't have time for.

1. Background

1.1 About The Fostering Network

[The Fostering Network](#) is the UK's leading fostering charity. We are the essential network for fostering, bringing together everyone who is involved in the lives of fostered children. We support foster carers to transform children's lives and we work with fostering services and the wider sector to develop and share best practice.

We work to ensure all fostered children and young people experience stable family life and we are passionate about the difference foster care makes. We champion fostering and seek to create vital change, so that foster care is the very best it can be. We have been leading the fostering agenda for more than 40 years, influencing and shaping policy and practice at every level.

As a membership organisation we bring together individuals and services involved in providing foster care across the UK. We have approximately 60,000 individual members and nearly 400 organisational members, both local authorities and independent fostering providers, which cover 75 per cent of foster carers in the UK. Our views are informed by our members, as well as through research; in this way we aim to be the voice of foster care.

1.2 The Fostering Communities programme

[Fostering Communities](#) is a national programme of improvement and support led by The Fostering Network in Wales and funded by the Welsh Government from 2020 – 2023. The programme supports looked after children and their foster families throughout Wales, by improving wellbeing outcomes for children and increasing the competence, confidence and motivation of the fostering workforce. As part of our Fostering Communities programme we will be producing a [series of briefing papers](#) for the fostering community in Wales which will cover a range of relevant and useful topics.

2. Self-care for foster carers

2.1 A note from the author

'Along with my wife and children, we are a foster family. After seven years we can't imagine a life that didn't include welcoming children, getting to know them (and their families), trying our best to help them to settle in, and to relax. The sadness we experience associated with goodbyes, even when it's a positive outcome is something I doubt I will ever get used to. We love each of the ten children we have had the privilege to meet through fostering and they have all become a part of our family.'

Our home is loud, busy, fun, and loving. It's also a safe place for children, many of whom have been mistreated. They often arrive hysterically upset, mistrusting, withdrawn, scared of us and with few belongings.

It can be easy to forget that for foster carers 'home' is now also a place of work. I sometimes wonder if a foster carer 'work hat' is ever really removed? Before fostering, I could have a bad day in work and come home where there were no professional responsibilities. Now I come home to the place where we have meetings and are required to make daily recordings. The boundaries of the professional and personal selves are easily blurred – foster carers are based at home, where they live as a family.

There is a cost to those providing care to children who have experienced trauma, a real risk of burnout, compassion fatigue and secondary trauma. Self-care is important'.

SK, foster carer

2.2 Introduction

Fostering a child can be one of the most rewarding experiences of your life – but it can also be stressful for you and the rest of your family. Taking care of yourself is critically important, not only for your own wellbeing, but also for the wellbeing of the child you're caring for and your family. Finding time for yourself can be a challenge, as you juggle family, relationships, your home and work life.

Fostering is a lifestyle, and it can be isolating for foster carers. Children need and deserve so much from their carers. Many of the friends and family of those fostering may understand what they do practically, but when it comes to the emotions involved, rarely do they really 'get' it – not to mention the need to respect confidentiality. The team around the foster family, supporting social workers and other foster carers, all play an important role in encouraging and 'holding up' foster families as well as spotting the signs of burnout.

2.3 What is self-care? – taking some time for you

Self-care is the action that an individual takes to meet their own wellbeing needs. This action or activity can be alone or with others and will be unique to your personality and character. Taking time out of the day-to-day busyness is important. It is restorative and allows carers to respond more mindfully, despite the many pressures of the fostering role.

It can be easy to neglect your own wellbeing while looking after everyone else's everyday life. Doing so can lead to feelings of stress or being overwhelmed.

Finding time for yourself will help you find strength to meet the needs of your family and the responsibilities of the fostering role. It is also important to remember that the opposite to self-care is self-neglect. Rather than view this time dedicated to self-care as selfish or self-indulgent, foster carers could benefit from considering self-neglect as 'risky'. Tiredness can soon become exhaustion and the feeling of stress can quickly lead to anxiety and overwhelm.

Foster carers give so much of themselves to meet the needs of the children in their care as it is such an important role. People often say they want to make a positive change through their work, and foster carers have the potential to improve the wellbeing of the children that have often been neglected and abused. So, there is always the drive for foster carers to give their all. Foster carers cannot afford to neglect themselves, as so many are dependent on them. Another aspect of self-care is the ability to 'tune in' to how you are feeling – are you stressed, anxious, or exhausted? If so, it is unlikely that the ironing pile really is today's urgent priority.

2.4 The sweet spot of stress

Stress isn't always a bad thing – a moderate level of stress such as a deadline or an important appointment can be a positive motivator. Stress can ensure that things get done. An absence of stress could even lead to low levels of motivation.

We all know that too much stress can be overwhelming and can trigger the fight or flight response. This is where a challenge is perceived by our brains as a threat, and we use the stone age part of our brain that is rooted in our caveman ancestry. The fight or flight response is there to keep us alive, but what if the stress is not life threatening. What if it is just another meeting to attend? A phone call or your child or young person feeling distressed?

Unfortunately, it's a vicious cycle and the more we activate the stress response, the less we are able to cope with stress and more triggered we become. We can become hyperalert, our brain can remain 'on guard', constantly scanning the horizon for the next threat to our wellbeing. Self-care has a counteracting impact on stress levels which in turn increases our ability to cope in stressful times.

When feeling stressed it is helpful to understand the source of the stress, and realise it could be self-inflicted. Could it be that the foster carer is holding themselves to unrealistic standards? Or is the pressure external? Could it be a reluctance of saying 'no', to a placement when you need a break, or to a last-minute request from a social worker? Sometimes foster carers don't ask for help through fear of judgement, and feeling that asking for additional help could be viewed as an inability to cope by professionals.

2.5 Compassion fatigue – the cost of caring

Compassion fatigue is experienced by those in caring professions, often described as a numb sensation, indecision, a state of tension, and a preoccupation with the suffering of those that you are helping. It can also

present with feeling overwhelmed, failure, low mood and hopelessness. The trauma that children in foster care have experienced has the potential to be re-experienced by their foster carer. Despite the emotional impact, foster carers are motivated to continue fostering and acknowledge it is important work. There is a real danger though, that without adequate self-care strategies, resilience can reduce overtime. No foster carer, despite their experiences, passion, energy, and enthusiasm, is immune from compassion fatigue. Often the child's trauma has been experienced within relationships. Therefore the healing must come through relationships, and this requires so much empathy from the foster carer. Caring so much that it hurts is an indicator for compassion fatigue.

Just because you have dealt with a similar situation previously, doesn't mean you will be able to do it again this time. Some foster carers need to make use of planned sleepovers or take breaks in between placements to 'catch their breath'. Saying 'no' when discussing a child who needs to be cared for by a fostering family is actually very difficult to do. Foster carers understand the pressures experienced by fostering services and the shortage of foster carers but can often be exactly what the foster family needs. Not having recovery time when needed or being able to create distance from children's trauma can build up and increase the likelihood of compassion fatigue and placement breakdowns. Having good boundaries and communicating the need for help, support or a break in between placements all contributes towards having adequate self-care strategies.

"The expectation that we can be immersed in suffering and loss daily and not be touched by it is as unrealistic as expecting to be able to walk through water without getting wet."

Rachel Remen ¹

3. Practical self-care strategies

3.1 Self-care restores you

One thing that you must do as a foster carer is to be intentional about self-care.

Self-care is not a luxury, nor is it optional. It is a professional requirement for those potentially immersed in suffering and loss each day. It is something that you make space and time for within your busy life that allows you to continue to give to others. Foster carers work with trauma, loss and neglect. This can make your heart ache; you work so closely with children that you have to be mindful of the potential for secondary trauma. The children in your care need you, and self-care is restorative and essential.

Remember, self-care is unique to the individual. Self-care to one person could be another's worst nightmare! Some may enjoy walking the dog and getting out of the house. Others might love reading, enjoy their own company with an hour's peace to themselves, or socialising with friends that replenishes your reserves. Self-care comes in all shapes and sizes – it doesn't matter what you do, what matters is the intention you do it with.

¹ Remen, R.N. (1996) *Kitchen Table Wisdom: Stories That Heal*. New York: Riverhead Books.

You cannot pour from an empty cup, so stop the guilt and make some time for you!

3.2 Make a to-do list

A list is a great way of calming a busy mind, and being able to view all your responsibilities on paper or using the notes function on your phone can make achieving them more likely. Your list could include general errands, shopping for vital items, returning phone calls or preparing for a child's review meeting. Ticking the items off the list is also immensely satisfying. You can prioritise those activities which need to be done that day or week. You could also include setting aside time to connect with a friend and time for yourself. Seeing everything written down can help to make things feel more manageable. A to-do list is a positive way of providing self-care, and is a practical strategy that enables you to identify your priorities for each day, leading you to be more present and relaxed.

3.3 Give and receive support

It's easier to manage challenges when you have positive relationships with those around you including family, friends and neighbours. Having a good network of people around you when starting out on your fostering journey should be explored, and also as you continue in your fostering role. This is something to keep coming back to and regularly reviewing to ensure you have people around you – and being part of a fostering community will help you feel secure, confident and empowered.

Strengthen your social networks by:

- Building relationships where you feel respected and appreciated.
- Accepting support from others and looking for opportunities to help and support them e.g. becoming a foster carer mentor if you are well supported by your fostering service.
- Building your network so you have multiple friends and connections that you can turn to in different situations and needs.
- Foster carers are sometimes reluctant to ask for support, but raising your hand to say 'this is hard, I need some help' is actually a sign of strength and not of weakness. Whether it is a family member, friend or fellow foster carer, perhaps someone within your support network. Speaking to your supervising social worker honestly for support is critical to maintaining stability.

3.4 Share experiences with fellow foster carers

Being a foster carer is incredibly rewarding, but it can also be extremely challenging. It can push you out of your comfort zone, stretch your parenting

skills and strain your emotions. And, at the same time, there are not many people outside of fostering who understand what you are going through.

Whatever the reason, fostering can be a lonely role – yet, because of its challenges, it's vitally important that foster carers have a support network around them, helping them practically and emotionally.

Your supervising social worker should also be linking you up to local foster carer support groups, coffee mornings, foster care associations and forums, male support groups, foster carer mentors/buddying, kinship groups, and other LGBTQ carers, for example.

3.5 Develop your knowledge about child development and attachment

Knowing what to expect makes fostering easier. Understanding child development and how trauma and neglect impacts attachment can help you if you are facing challenges. This knowledge will help you:

- Know what to expect as a child grows and develops.
- Understand what children need to help them learn and thrive.
- Develop new skills so you can help the child you look after to be happy and healthy.
- Recognise a child's unique needs, strengths and interests.
- Understand how to respond in a positive and effective way when a child is having trouble coping.

3.6 Look after your physical and mental health

Looking after your physical health can have a positive impact on your mental and emotional wellbeing. Getting enough sleep is essential to good mental health, but it can also be a really useful self-care tool for when you need to get away from your thoughts or the situation, for a while. Trying to establish good sleep routines, to relax in the evening and, in turn, get a good night's sleep for yourself. Consider giving yourself a power nap in the day whilst the children are at school. Fresh air, deep breaths and a walk around the block can make a world of difference in the moment. Building more regular self-care activities is a great way to ensure that self-care becomes an everyday practice for you.

Explore the internet for tips and ideas on how to use mindfulness every day – practice meditation, reflection or learn a new skill like yoga or tai chi. Finding a class with others can make you more likely to prioritise attending this and help you to make a commitment to taking time for self-care regularly. Building self-care into your routine will support you to ensure that it becomes part of every day normal life.

3.7 It is OK to say 'no'

Often when foster carers are neglecting self-care, they may find it challenging to balance how they are feeling, with the expectations that may be placed on them, by themselves or their fostering service. There is lots of advice about setting health boundaries online, which can help you communicate your needs, without seeming aggressive or feeling guilty about neglecting the needs of others. For some foster carers, a break from their fostering role is exactly what they need to readjust after a child has moved on from the foster family. For others, they prefer to put their energy into helping the next child who needs their care.

Being open and honest with the supervising social worker is critical to provide you with the best support. The supervising social worker should consider the foster carer's wellbeing and current situation before contacting to discuss future placements.

4. When to ask for professional support

Sometimes foster carers can struggle for so long that the feelings of sadness, anxiety and hopelessness can become overwhelming.

Your supervising social worker should be a great source of support for you and your family. Try to be open and honest with them to enable them to support you with taking care of yourself and being at your best for the children who you care for. Contact your supervising social worker if there is any further support they can offer you, both practical or emotional, or to check if there is access to an employee stress support.

Your GP will be also be able to offer help and support and, if necessary, refer you to mental health services.

Try to talk to a trusted friend or relative, so they are also aware of how you're feeling and can check in on you. It is important to remember that when discussing your own wellbeing in relation to fostering, that sensitive information is not disclosed about the child or their family.

As part of their membership package, foster carers who are members of The Fostering Network can access our independent and confidential **stress support service**, available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Please call 01384 889 549 and ask for the stress helpline.

Remember – it's OK to ask for help and you should not be judged for reaching out. It's a strength to know when you need some additional support.

5. Additional resources and support

Useful reading resource

Remen, R.N. (1996) *Kitchen Table Wisdom: Stories That Heal*. New York: Riverhead Books.

Nottingham Trent University

Secondary trauma causing stress among foster carers, according to new study. Foster carers need more support to combat stress and burnout, according to the findings of a study by psychologists at Nottingham Trent University (NTU).

Secondary Trauma NTU

Bristol University

A downloadable pdf is available on the subject of 'compassion fatigue and foster carers'. **Compassion Fatigue Bristol**

Mind

The [website](#) for the Mind charity contains a lot of information and support if you feel you are suffering with a mental health problem, or just want to see what help there is.

Samaritans

The Samaritans [website](#) has a lot of helpful information and resources including a self-help app.

6. How The Fostering Network can help

The Fostering Network offers advice, information and support. Our expertise and knowledge are always up-to-date and available through our vital member helplines, publications, training and consultancy.

Advice

[Fosterline Wales](#) provides a free help and advice line, providing information about all aspects of foster care, including tax and national insurance, benefits, allowances and insurance. It also offers confidential support, including to those who face an allegation, or who may be concerned about a care plan, or who are unclear about the legislation and guidance related to foster care in Wales.

Call us on 0800 316 7664 from 9.30am - 12.30pm Monday to Friday.

If you call outside this time, please leave a message and someone will call you back as soon as possible.

You can email us at fosterlinewales@fostering.net

Support and resources

Our website is an essential source of information, while our online community brings together foster carers for peer support and advice. Members can log in to share their experience and get advice from other foster carers. Our online community is a safe and secure area to discuss foster care matters.

thefosteringnetwork.org.uk

Training and consultancy

Wherever you are in your fostering career, as a foster carer, social worker or manager, The Fostering Network has a range of [training](#) designed to meet your development needs. For more information, please email wales@fostering.net.

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