



**"The expectation that we can be immersed in suffering and loss daily and not be touched by it is as realistic as expecting to be able to walk through water and not get wet." ~ Rachel Remen, Kitchen Table Wisdom: Stories That Heal**

# **SELF-CARE FOR THE CAREGIVER**

**TRAUMA STEWARDSHIP FOR FOSTER PARENTS**

**By Susan Cutler Egbert, Ph.D., LCSW, and Sean Camp, LCSW**

It is an inescapable fact that the children in our care have all been exposed to some form of trauma. Simply being brought into care is a traumatic process that involves the loss of everything with which the child is familiar. In addition, the experiences that lead to children coming into care — abuse/neglect, domestic violence, substance abuse — add to their trauma burden. As caregivers, we are exposed to these difficult stories on a daily basis, and we feel their impact profoundly as we parent children whose moods and behavior reflect the pain they feel. In this way, their trauma becomes our stewardship.

Trauma stewardship is a term introduced by Laura van Dernoot Lipksy and Connie Burk to describe the practice of being self-aware and intentionally caring for oneself in order to remain effective and to prevent becoming overwhelmed by the challenge of caring for others. For foster parents, this means helping the children we serve manage their suffering without taking it on as our own.

When we do not acknowledge or address our own trauma stewardship, we place ourselves at risk for burnout, compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma.

Foster caregivers are especially vulnerable to vicarious trauma because we naturally become attached to, protective of and concerned for the children we serve and support, often for extended periods of time. It is normal for us to struggle with concern for these children, the frequent reminders of the obstacles they face and the human desire to relieve their

pain. Over time these struggles can overwhelm us. Without realizing it, we may become hopeless, detached and exhausted rather than resourceful, connected and energetic.

Warning signs of vicarious trauma/compassion fatigue include a sense that one can never do enough, hypervigilance, diminished creativity, an inability to embrace complexity, physical ailments, difficulty listening and deliberate avoidance. The Mental Health Commission of Canada offers a Mental Health Continuum

**BURNOUT:** a feeling of physical and emotional exhaustion resulting from prolonged stress and frustration leading to a depleted ability to cope with demands and feelings of powerlessness.

**COMPASSION FATIGUE:** a deep erosion of our compassion and ability to tolerate and care about the strong emotions and difficult stories of others.

**VICARIOUS/SECONDARY TRAUMA:** a change in how we view the world that results from repeated exposure to the traumatic experiences of others.

Model that suggests a range of well-being with two extreme ends. It is normal for foster caregivers to find themselves at various places on this continuum, depending on the stressors we experience and our ability to cope.

*See the Mental Health Continuum model image on the next page.*

By engaging in the practice of self-care through trauma stewardship, we can avoid time spent in the “red zone” when dealing with situations that threaten our own well-being and sense of balance.

### **Self-Care with Intention: The Practice of Trauma Stewardship**

The following personal self-care strategies, adapted from the book “Supporting the Wounded Educator: A Trauma-Sensitive Approach to Self-care” by Dardi and Joe Hendershott, are good suggestions that apply to caregivers who are feeling the impact of parenting children with traumatic experiences.

**Journal.** Journaling is a safe place for us to decompress negative emotions and situations, as well as to create a

space where we can realize that there is hope amid chaos and stress. Use writing to “download” and process your experiences as a foster caregiver.

**Choose Your Words Wisely.** It seems to be human nature to criticize ourselves, especially in difficult parenting situations. Be aware and fight this tendency; be intentional with your positive self-talk.

**Know Your Triggers.** There is strength in understanding how we react to situations that upset us and cause us emotional distress as par-

ents. Allow yourself to feel what you feel, learn to understand why you are responding the way you are, and know that you have the skills and experience to manage triggering situations.

**Unplug.** The quantity and quality of time invested in our devices (media, gaming, social media, etc.) often leaves us in a worse emotional space than when we started. Be mindful and hold yourself accountable for the impact that time and mental energy spent is having on your own sense of well-being and parenting effectiveness.

**Learn to Say No.** It is necessary for us to create healthy boundaries by declining requests that create anxious, burdensome feelings. Be sure

your “yes” to other people is not a “no” to you that drains away the mental and emotional resources you need to care for yourself and others.

**Learn to Say Yes.** Sometimes natural helpers and caregivers are the slowest to accept help from others. Be willing to say “yes” when someone offers their time or resources to ease your burden.

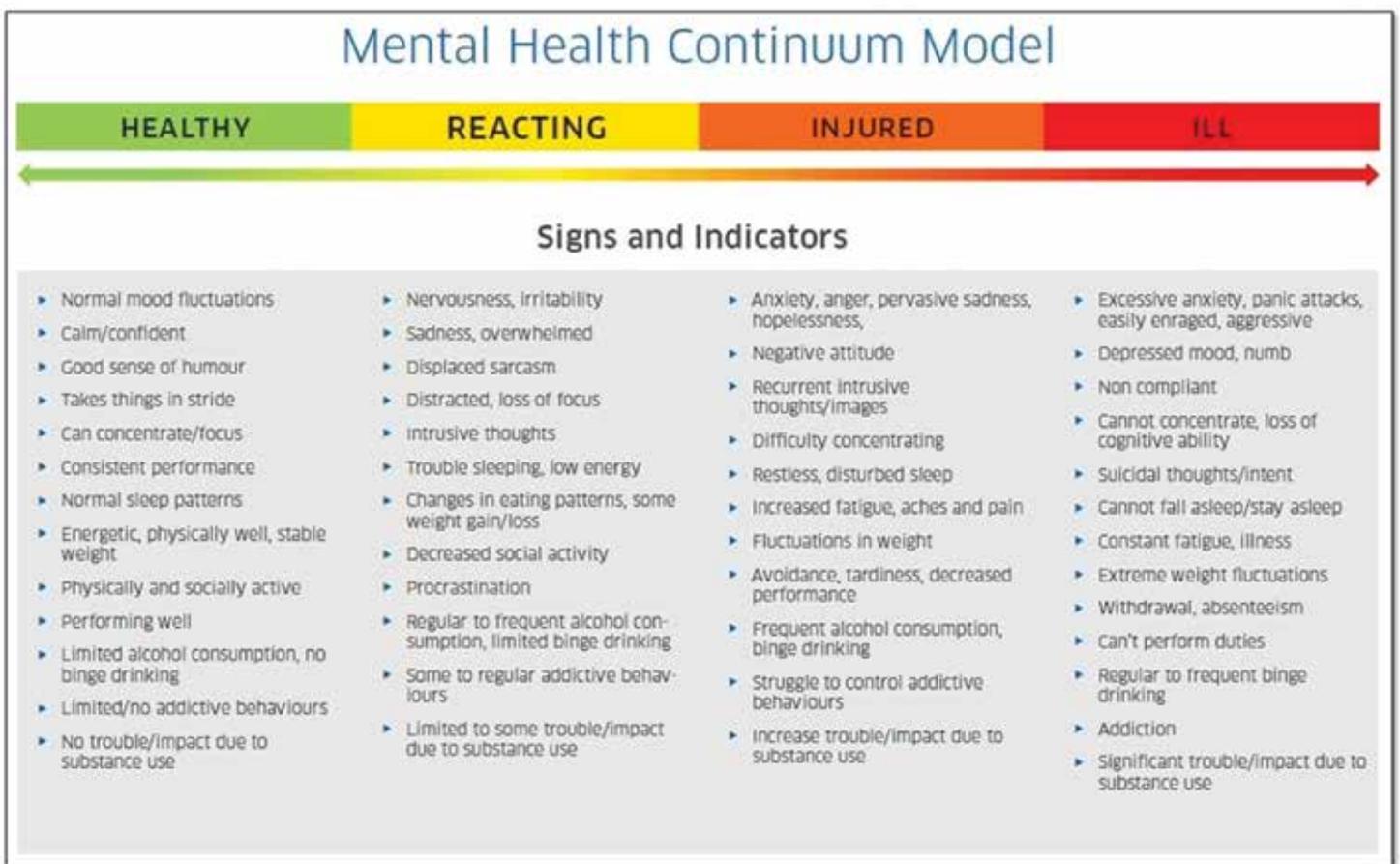
**Be Intentional with Kindness Toward Others.** Acts of kindness are self-renewing for us as the giver as well as for the receiver. Look for opportunities, no matter how simple or small, to make someone else’s day brighter.

**It’s Not a Competition.** Author and researcher Brené Brown says “com-

parison kills creativity and joy.” Stop measuring yourself and your parenting gifts against what you think others bring to the table; your situation is uniquely your own.

**Laugh.** “Against the assault of laughter nothing can stand,” said author Mark Twain. Laughter really is the best medicine. Learn to see the humor in the situations being a foster family brings, find your inner child — and don’t go a day without laughter.

**Know When to Say When.** Those of us who do this difficult work care deeply about the children we serve and often exhaust ourselves by burning the candle at both ends — continuously. No one can keep this up forever. You don’t need a justifiable



reason to take time for yourself; give yourself permission. Keep allowing space for the best version of you to be at the forefront of your days.

In addition to personal strategies, it is important that foster caregivers have connections to other parents and professionals who understand our situations and the unique challenges we face. The following self-care suggestions are useful when considering our relationships and interactions with others as we do this critically important work.

**Be a Trusted Colleague.** We all need a colleague who knows how to listen, laugh and offer constructive feedback. Be a safe and supportive resource for other foster caregivers and professionals.

**Avoid Negative Interactions.** "Everything influences each of us, and because of that I try to make sure that my experiences are positive," said author Maya Angelou. Don't allow negativity to overly influence your perspective and change the way you view your work.

**Be A Mentor, Find A Mentor.** The greatest benefit of mentoring is relationships — healthy, honest, mutually renewing relationships. Seek out other foster caregivers to learn from

and then pay it forward by sharing your experiences and wisdom with others.

**Forgive.** In the heated and stressful environment of foster care, there are often intense moments and painful interactions in which we are

makes us more effective and reduces burnout, compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma. •

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not always our best selves. Forgive others for these inevitable episodes and recognize they are only human, and don't forget to grant yourself the same compassion.

### Conclusion

When we view the trauma of the children we serve in terms of stewardship, we remember that we are being entrusted with their stories and often their very lives. We recognize that this is an incredible honor as well as a tremendous responsibility. No work is more important than that of being a foster caregiver. Committing to our own self-care with planned strategies

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