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A Foster Parent's Guide to Self Care

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Supporting you: why self-care matters



Fostering is an incredibly rewarding role, but shaping the lives of children living with trauma can also be challenging and takes a huge amount of patience, resilience and empathy, every single day.

Whether you're a seasoned foster parent or new to the role, if you don't look after your own well-being, it may become more difficult to keep providing children with the care and support they need. That's why it's essential to build a self-care toolkit that helps you feel your best and gives you the strength to carry on.

Self-care is often misunderstood as taking a trip to a spa or having a bubble bath. Although these things can be helpful, self-care is really about making small changes to your everyday life to protect your overall well-being and to prevent burnout from creeping up on you.

But sometimes, even those acts of self-care can feel out of reach when you're trying to cope in the here and now. For example, when a child's survival strategies or big emotions knock your emotional thermometer off balance, sending your nervous system into fight-or-flight, and everything feels too big to manage.



These are the moments when self-care is needed the most but might not be possible, and when leaning on survival care can help you reorganise your thoughts and keep going.

At ISP, we value your dedication to the children in your care, and we're here to support you - as well as them - on your fostering journey. That's why we've created this guide, which will help you:

- **Safeguard yourself from foster parent burnout.**
- **Understand the difference between self-care and survival care.**
- **Recognise when to use survival care.**
- **Create survival care strategies to lean on in difficult moments.**
- **Build a self-care toolkit to protect your long-term well-being.**
- **Know who to turn to if you're struggling.**



"In the beginning, fostering was far from easy. I think I came into it thinking it was as simple as giving a child a safe home away from the challenges they'd been exposed to. I don't think I had a real awareness of just how much trauma can affect a young person in every aspect of their life, from their development to their understanding of the world."

Bev, foster parent.
Read her inspirational fostering story [here](#).

Safeguarding yourself from foster parent burnout

As a foster parent, when you're caring for children with complex trauma, it can be hard to separate yourself from your role because it's more than just a job; it's a passion, a purpose and something you can't simply switch off from at the end of the day.

When you're caring for children who've experienced abuse or neglect, and you see their suffering every day due to the ongoing effects of trauma, it can lead to compassion fatigue and secondary traumatic stress. When this is coupled with your daily responsibilities, it can quickly lead to burnout if left unchecked.

Burnout is a state of physical and emotional exhaustion, presenting in different ways, such as feeling:

- **Rundown and getting ill more often**
- **Numb, detached, or hopeless**
- **Tired all the time and drained**
- **Unable to go about your normal day**
- **Trapped or stuck**
- **Like a failure or doubting your ability as a foster parent**
- **Anxious or depressed, leading to a diagnosis of a mental health condition**

Burnout doesn't happen overnight. It often builds up over time when you struggle to allocate time for yourself or find ways to cope in stressful situations. Slowly, these challenging experiences layer on top of each other until life starts to feel too heavy.

According to The Fostering Network, 58% of foster parents have experienced burnout or poor well-being at some point on their fostering journey.

But it doesn't have to be this way – with our support, and by practising self-care and survival care, you can safeguard yourself from foster parent burnout and continue to enjoy your fostering journey.



Self-care vs Survival care

Self-care and survival care are similar – they both help you look after your overall well-being. But when and why you use them sets them apart.

Self-care is about maintaining your emotional, mental and physical health. It's preventative, helping you reduce the risk of burnout, strengthen your resilience, and protect your long-term well-being.

Whereas survival care is about what helps you right now. It's the steps you take in the moment to feel safer and more in control of your thoughts, feelings, and actions when you're feeling overwhelmed or dysregulated. Survival care is the point when self-care becomes finding small ways to get through the day or manage something you have no choice but to face.

Building self-care strategies that work for you can limit how often you need to rely on survival care. But even with these in place, there will be times on your fostering journey when you have to dig a little deeper into survival care.



Recognising when to use survival care strategies

Survival care strategies are the small things that help you feel better, bring you back to the present, and give you the energy boost you need to face the next challenge.

But before you can begin using survival care, you need to recognise how you're feeling. This self-awareness helps you consciously realise when things are getting too much, so you can act quickly by reaching for a survival care strategy before things become unmanageable.

The emotional thermometer is a brilliant tool that can help. This simple visual scale, which starts at 1 (you're feeling great) and goes up to 10 (where you're exploding out of control), can help you become more consciously aware of how you're really feeling. It can also encourage you to get into the habit of regularly checking in with yourself, so stick it on the fridge or bathroom mirror as a gentle reminder to pause and reflect throughout the day.

Once you're aware, you can lean on your survival care strategies. These will be personal to everyone, but next in this guide are a few ideas to help you think about what could work for you.



Survival care strategies

We spoke to some of our current foster parents to find out what survival care strategies they lean on when their day feels hard. If you're struggling to come up with some of your own, you could try a few from our list to build a survival care toolkit that works for you.

Use grounding techniques

When things feel overwhelming and your nervous system goes into overdrive, grounding techniques can help you regulate and bring you back to the present. Here are some examples:

Deep breathing: Close your eyes and breathe in through your nose for five seconds, then out through your mouth for seven. Repeat as many times as needed to slow down your heart rate.

Butterfly hug: Cross your arms over your chest so each hand sits on the opposite upper arm or shoulder. Gently tap your arms one at a time in a soothing rhythm.

Light exercise: Release increased levels of adrenaline and cortisol with light exercise, such as stretching, walking around the block, or even doing a few star jumps in your living room.



Take micro me-times



Sometimes, all you need is a few minutes by yourself to gather your thoughts and feel ready to tackle the next challenge.

Whether it's pausing for a cup of tea, pretending you're taking the rubbish out to get a breath of fresh air, or popping to the shop on your own, these micro me-times can make all the difference. They can lift your mood, give you an energy boost, and help you get through to bedtime.

Write it down or text a friend

If you don't have time for a long chat, you could ask a friend to be your go-to person to text when you need to vent your frustrations or want a reminder that you're doing a great job. Even if they don't reply straight away, just offloading can help you feel a lot better.

If you'd rather keep your thoughts to yourself, use your phone to make a note, or buy a notebook specifically for times when you simply need to

get racing thoughts out of your head. When you feel more at peace, you can go back to your notes to remind yourself what happened, why you think it made you feel a particular way, and how you'd handle it next time.

Pick your battles

When you're in survival care mode, it's more important than ever to pick your battles. If arguing about screen time or desperately encouraging a child to brush their teeth sends you to ten on your emotional thermometer, you have to ask yourself, is this a battle worth having today?

Sometimes, you just have to let it go to protect your well-being and avoid reacting in a way that might harm the bond you've worked tirelessly to build with a child. You can always tackle an issue tomorrow, when the day is new and everyone feels calmer.





PACE can help you too

As a foster parent, you might see PACE parenting as something that only benefits children. However, in tense moments, when you're feeling overwhelmed, frustrated, or close to burnout, it can also support you.

When you practise the playfulness and acceptance principles of PACE, it can help you manage your own emotions and stay connected with the child in your care, even when you're in survival care mode.

One way you can do this is by grabbing their favourite toy or a puppet and using it to explain how you're feeling. For example, if you have a pirate puppet, you could use a pirate voice to say, "I'm feeling grumpy today because I didn't get enough sleep. Maybe I should walk the plank!"

As you playfully explain your feelings through their puppet or toy, not only will you feel better for having a chance to vent your frustrations, but you'll also turn a stressful situation into a moment of connection and shared laughter with the child in your care.

Slot in feel good things

When things feel heavy, little pick-me-ups that help you feel good and make you smile can get you through each day.

There's nothing quite like the feeling of slipping on your favourite hoodie and a cosy pair of socks or starting your day with a song you know will lift your spirits. These seemingly small things can make a huge difference to your mood, energy, and overall well-being.

If you really want to be prepared, create an emergency calming box filled with things that bring you joy and soothe your soul, such as essential oils, a stress ball, or a quote. Keep it somewhere easy to find, so you can quickly grab your chosen items whenever you feel overwhelmed.

When you take a small moment just for you, it can help you feel more grounded and remind you of who you are, how far you've come, and that you're capable of more than you realise.

Extend empathy to yourself

As a foster parent, empathy probably comes naturally to you, but it can be easy to forget to extend that same kind of empathy to yourself.

If another foster parent came to you and said, "I'm struggling today", you wouldn't call them a failure or tell them to give up. You'd likely offer some reassurance, a bit of advice, and a few kind words to help them feel better.

But when you're in the thick of it, it can be hard to show yourself the same kind of understanding.

So, during tough times, try to remind yourself that you're only human, reframing your thinking from 'I can't do this' to 'This is hard, but I'm still here, showing up for a child.'

And when you're lying in bed, replaying the day, instead of focusing on what went wrong, think about the things that went well. Even if they feel small, they have probably had a bigger impact on the child in your care than you realise.



"I think it's really important to do those things – if you're not refreshed, you can't look after the children effectively."

Andy, a foster parent for ISP. Read his and his husband's fostering story here.



"We find pockets of time to spend with each other. When they're at school, we take the dog for a walk, and in the evenings, we watch telly together."

Realistic acts of self-care



When you have time to use self-care strategies, they can protect your long-term well-being and help make the stresses of daily life feel more manageable. They don't have to be big and include things that, at first glance, may not seem like an act of self-care. Here are some examples of realistic acts of self-care that, over time, can help you feel more in control, grounded and ready to face challenges head-on.

Get organised to reduce your mental load



Organisation is an act of self-care, even if it doesn't sound as relaxing as heading to a spa or having a weekend away. When you're organised, it gives you less to think about, reducing your mental load and helping you find time for more enjoyable self-care activities.

As a foster parent, your schedule is likely packed with appointments, meetings, and training. Prevent your mental checklist from growing day by day by implementing some of our ideas that will help clear your mind and lighten your load.

- **Meal plan:** Plan your meals for the week so you know exactly what to buy and what you'll be cooking each day. Ask children in your care for their input, so you know you'll be cooking something everyone enjoys.
- **Schedule your weekly shop:** Finding time to do a big supermarket shop can be just as stressful as actually doing it. When you order groceries straight to your home, it gives you back the time you would've spent out shopping to do something else.
- **Keep some meals in the freezer:** Whether you batch cook or order healthy meals online from somewhere like COOK, keeping some meals in your freezer for busy or low-energy days can lift a weight off your shoulders come tea-time.
- **Use a shared calendar:** Keep everything logged in one shared calendar. Whether that be therapy sessions, supervision meetings, or weekends for yourself, having everything in one place can prevent schedule clashes and help you feel in control.
- **Create an emergency info folder:** Keep medication lists, contacts and other crucial information in one place, so if you're ever faced with an emergency, you know where everything is.
- **Prep for the next day:** There's nothing worse than waking up and immediately being faced with missing school uniforms, PE kits, or pencil cases. Prepping the night before can save you some time, energy, and stress on busy mornings.



- **Pre-pack for regular activities:** Prepare ready-packed bags for visits, school, and appointments that you can quickly grab on your way out the door.
- **Create a calming kit:** Like you, the children in your care will have special items that help ground and regulate them, such as headphones, books, and fidget toys. Pop a few of these into a box ready to use when they're feeling overwhelmed.
- **Use apps to reduce your load:** These days, there are apps for almost anything, designed to make your life easier and keep on top of everything, from your cleaning schedule and to-do lists to finances and exercise.



Be careful with your time

Your time is precious, and sometimes we all need a little reminder that it's okay to say 'no' or to postpone something that can wait until another day. Setting boundaries around how you spend your time and who you spend it with isn't selfish; it's an act of self-care.

Some people might not like being told no, but if you keep saying 'yes' when you're overwhelmed and barely have time to breathe, burnout is inevitable. And if you do get some pushback from family or friends when you tell them you can't commit, gently remind them that you're doing your best. You're prioritising your own well-being so you can continue to be there for children in your care.

Move your body

When you're exhausted, it can be really difficult to find the motivation to get up and move. But daily exercise, no matter how small, can really improve your energy levels, lift your mood, and safeguard your mental health.

So, stretch in the morning, take a 10-minute walk around the block, or find something else that works for you. Whatever you choose, your body and mind will thank you for it now and in the future.



A photograph of two women standing outdoors in a park-like setting with trees in the background. The woman on the left is a Black woman with her hair pulled back, wearing a white t-shirt, and is clapping her hands. The woman on the right is a white woman with reddish-brown hair, wearing a yellow t-shirt, and is also clapping. Both are smiling at the camera. A large, stylized white flower graphic is overlaid on the right side of the image.

Get some fresh air

Make sure you get outside at least once a day, even if it's raining, and use all your senses to be present in the moment.

Listen to the birds sing and rain pattering on the pavement. Breathe in the scent of freshly cut grass and gently fragranced flowers. Run your fingers over rough bark and dew-kissed plants. Watch the bees hover over daffodils and the butterflies silently flap their wings.

When you just sit and take it all in, it will remind you that in this noisy, turbulent, and unpredictable world, you can still find peace and beauty.

Escape through art

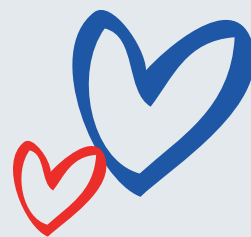
When your holiday feels like a lifetime away, music, film and books can provide a much-needed break from reality.

Dance around the living room, watch a whole film from start to finish, or read a good chunk of that book you bought a year ago. Art isn't just there to entertain us, but to help us escape from the monotony, stress, and responsibilities of daily life.

It can also help you process your emotions. Need a good laugh? Pop on a comedy. Feeling frustrated? Sing your favourite song at the top of your lungs. Need a good cry? Read your favourite romance novel.

Sometimes, just having a chance to express your emotions while you're on your own, immersed in another world, is enough to help you feel refreshed and reset.

Regularly check in on your inner voice



When you're busy and feeling close to burnout, your inner voice can either make things better or ten times worse.

Although it's not always easy to switch your mindset from pessimistic to positive, regularly checking in on your inner voice can help you catch unhelpful thoughts before they spiral.

For example, if you've asked someone for advice but they don't get back to you straight away, when your inner voice is slipping into negative territory, you may find yourself thinking, 'I shouldn't have gone

to them for advice, they probably think I'm useless.' When, in reality, they are likely just as busy as you. This adds to your mental load because now you're not only worrying about the original issue, but also about how you're perceived for reaching out. Over time, this could prevent you from seeking support, leaving you isolated.

But when you catch those thoughts early, you can learn to reframe them, so instead of thinking they don't have time for you, you might think, 'They'll get back to me when they have time, I'm sure they'll have some great advice.'

Know when to take a break

At ISP, we know that caring for children living with trauma isn't easy. That's why, when you foster with us, you receive 22 nights of paid respite allowance each year.

Respite can help you stay on top of things and give you the time you need to rest and recharge, so you can continue supporting the children and young people in your care. And when you do choose to use respite,

we make sure children are introduced to their respite foster family beforehand. This helps them feel safe, secure, and familiar with who they'll be staying with.

Over time, respite foster families often become like extended family, offering more trusted adults, positive role models, and meaningful relationships that can last a lifetime.



Tap into our support



At ISP, our wrap-around therapeutic support means you're never alone on your fostering journey. We're here for you, no matter the hour, so don't wait to reach out:

- We're only a phone call away. Whether you're on the brink of burnout or just need a little guidance or advice, our team is here for you 24/7.
 - Make the most of your supervision meetings. Be open and honest with your social worker about the challenges you're facing, so they can give you the support you need.
 - Join our reflective practice sessions. These group discussions can help you reflect on your experiences and learn from other foster parents. They're also a great way to find out which well-being strategies work for them.
 - Lean on our network of fostering specialists. From therapists and social workers to education advisors and counsellors, our network of fostering professionals is here to support you in all areas of foster parent life.
 - Relax and have fun. Come along to the activities and events we plan throughout the year. They're a great place to meet other foster families and build an even wider network of support.
- Explore our well-being training. These courses will teach you how to build your own well-being toolkit, practise mindfulness, and safeguard yourself from foster parent burnout.
 - Check out our well-being hub. Log in to our foster parent portal, where you can find guided meditations, workouts, and nutritious recipes that look after your body and mind.



"Within ISP, there is a fantastic support network. I honestly cannot stress that enough! At no point do you ever feel alone because there's always someone on hand, no matter what time of day or night it is. You've got a social worker, a fostering advisor (who's an experienced foster parent), a therapist, and other foster carers. All the staff are on hand if you need them - it's like a family."

Lucy, foster parent.

Remember:

You're only human

Every foster parent experiences challenges on their journey, and that's okay. What matters is how you manage those challenges.

Regardless of how you're feeling, you show up for children in your care every day, and that's something you should be proud of. But it's important to remember that you're only human and you can't run on empty.

Building self-care and survival strategies now will ensure you can continue to help children heal from their trauma, form trusting connections, and have the childhood they deserve.



If you'd like to learn more about becoming a foster parent, or have any questions relating to fostering, please reach out to our supportive team and they'll be happy to help.

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