

# Self-Care Strategies

For Caregivers of  
People With FASD

CANADA FASD RESEARCH NETWORK  
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## Caregiving and FASD

Caregivers of individuals with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD) can experience [high levels of stress](#). This can influence their health and wellbeing, which then in turn can impact their relationships with their children and families. However, caregivers of people with FASD also engage in [varied strategies](#) to care for themselves. It is especially important for [caregivers to find stress management and self-care](#) routines that work for them.

## What is Self-Care?

Self-care is a life-long practice focused on building our knowledge and experience to care for our health and wellbeing. Building self-care habits and routines can be challenging but can ultimately help improve our lives. Self-care looks different for everyone, and it's important to find options that works for you.

This resource provides a list of potential self-care activities to support the health and wellness of caregivers of individuals with FASD. These strategies were compiled as part of the [Caregiver Approaches, Resiliencies, and Experiences \(CARE\) Study](#) and have been adapted for download.

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## Caring for Yourself

As a caregiver, it can be hard to find time to take care of yourself. Some of the most common [barriers](#) to self-care for caregivers of individuals with FASD are a lack of time, resources, energy, and competing needs of the family. The following is a list of ideas for self-care that are quick, free, and can be used as often as needed throughout the day.

1. Breathe deeply, holding your breath between each inhale and exhale
2. Take a step outside for fresh air
3. Sit in the sun inside or outside
4. Take a “time out” and lay down for 5 minutes
5. Listen to a favorite song
6. Pet an animal
7. Walk around the block
8. Stretch
9. Watch a video that makes you laugh
10. Hug someone
11. Drink a glass of water
12. Take a 5-minute shower and notice how the water feels
13. Go to bed early

*“In dealing with those who are undergoing great suffering, if you feel “burnout” setting in, if you feel demoralized and exhausted, it is best, for the sake of everyone, to withdraw and restore yourself. The point is to have a long-term perspective.” – Dalai Lama*

# Deep Breathing

Deep breathing is a great, simple strategy for relieving stress and helping you to relax.

*“If all else fails and your mind is screaming in pain or blown open in chaos, there is still the breath. Sometimes all you can do is breathe and know that you are still breathing. One breath at a time. Just getting through this breath. And then the next one. And the next.” – Rick Hanson*

## Exercise

Whenever you like, find the breath and stay with it through one inhalation and exhalation. You could notice its sensations in your stomach, chest, or around the upper lip. Or the internal sensations inside the throat or in the diaphragm. Or sense the breath in the chest altogether.

Next, see if you can rest your attention in the breath for three full cycles of inhaling and exhaling. Then how about ten full cycles, from beginning to end? Distracting thoughts may nibble at your attention but disengage from them while sinking more and more deeply into the breath. And if you like, let go of counting and simply give over to the breath, breath after breath.

Somewhere in here, as you become more present in the breath, more absorbed in it, you could experience breathing as the whole body, the whole-body breathing.

**NOTE:** if you experience discomfort or trauma when you focus on your breath, modify this activity by focusing on an image or repeating a saying that feels nurturing to you.

*“As you breathe in, cherish yourself. As you breathe out, cherish all beings.” – Dalai Lama*

## Feeling Hopeful

Feeling hopeful in the face of struggles or uncertainty can have a deep impact on health, well-being, and resilience. Take a moment to think about something you look forward to, no matter how big or small, or even that dim “light at the end of the tunnel.” If nothing comes to mind, think about the things that are most important to you.

### “Hope” is the thing with Feathers (Emily Dickinson)

“Hope” is the thing with feathers  
That perches in the soul  
And sings the tune without the words  
And never stops - at all

And sweetest - in the Gale - is heard  
And sore must be the storm  
That could abash the little Bird  
That kept so many warm

I’ve heard it in the chilliest land  
And on the strangest Sea  
Yet – never – in Extremity,  
It asked a crumb - of me.

### Resources

For more hope-focused activities, [click on this link](#).

## Connecting with Other Caregivers

Caring for someone with FASD is a unique experience. Connecting with people in similar situations to you can be powerfully validating. Read the following stories about what FASD means to other caregivers:

- [What FASD Means to Me](#), Wanda Beland
- [What FASD is: a caregiver's perspective](#), Dorothy Reid
- [A caregiver's perspective on what FASD is](#), Anonymous

### Resources

- The CanFASD Family Advisory Committee has offered their wisdom in a beautiful video to show "[What it Takes](#)" to support someone with FASD.
- Click here for the "[I Am a Caregiver](#)" [Resource Guide](#)

## Grounding Yourself

When you're feeling stressed or overwhelmed, it can help to ground yourself in the present moment. Try this simple grounding strategy and use it going forward whenever you need to.

### Exercise

Sit comfortably. Close your eyes and take 3 deep breaths, in through the nose and out through the mouth. Open your eyes and look around the room to find:

- 5 things that you can see
- 4 things that you can feel
- 3 things that you can hear
- 2 things that you can smell
- 1 thing that you can taste

Take one more deep breath.



## Positive Affirmations

Caregivers of individuals with FASD have [remarkable strengths](#). They are flexible and responsive in their parenting style, use multiple strategies to engage with their kids, are patient and understanding, and advocate strongly to find and maintain external supports for their families.

### Exercise

Take a moment to think about and appreciate some of your personal strengths. If you're stuck, read the list below and notice what resonates for you. Repeat these affirmations to yourself daily.

I am kind and compassionate  
I can find gratitude in any situation  
I am courageous  
The past is gone, and I can focus on life ahead  
I embrace change  
This storm will pass  
I am competent and reliable  
I believe in myself  
I will learn and grow from this struggle  
I am strong enough to get through  
Life has more blessings to offer

## Moving on from Shame and Blame

People with FASD and their caregivers and families can experience many layers of shame and blame. In [this video](#), motivational speaker and FASD consultant, Myles Himmelreich, talks about the importance of shifting from shame and blame to support and care. One of the most powerful ways to manage shame and blame is to practice self-compassion. Self-compassion has been found to [reduce distress](#) in caregivers of individuals with FASD. Self-compassion [involves](#):

- 1) being kind and understanding toward yourself in times of suffering,
- 2) recognizing that suffering is part of the human experience,
- 3) observing our negative thoughts and feelings as they are and accepting them without judgment

### Exercise

Take a moment for a short practice in self-compassion. Think of a situation in your life that is difficult or causing you stress. Call the situation to mind. See if you can actually feel the stress and emotional discomfort in your body. Say to yourself:

1. *This is a moment of suffering*

That's mindfulness. Other options include: *This hurts. Ouch. This is stress.*

2. *Suffering is a part of life*

That's common humanity. Other options include: *Other people feel this way. I'm not alone. We all struggle in our lives.*

Now, put your hands over your heart, feel the warmth of your hands and the gentle touch of your hands on your chest. Or adopt the soothing touch you discovered felt right for you. Say to yourself:

3. *May I be kind to myself*

You can also ask yourself, "What do I need to hear right now to express kindness to myself?" Is there a phrase that speaks to you in your particular situation, such as:

*May I give myself the compassion that I need*

*May I learn to accept myself as I am*

*May I forgive myself*

*May I be strong.*

*May I be patient*

This practice can be used any time of day or night and will help you remember to evoke the three aspects of self-compassion when you need it most.

## Learning From Your Children

*"If you are a parent or grandparent, try seeing the children as your teachers. Observe them in silence sometimes. Listen more carefully to them. Read their body language. Assess their self-esteem by watching how they carry themselves, what they draw, what they see, how they behave. What are their needs in this moment? At this time in their day? At this stage in their lives?"*

*Ask yourself, "How can I help them right now?" Then follow what your heart tells you. And remember, advice is probably the last thing that will be useful in most situations, unless it is just the right moment for it, and you are very sensitive to the timing and how you frame things. Just being centered yourself, fully present and open and available, is a great gift for them. And mindful hugging doesn't hurt, either." – Jon Kabat-Zinn, Wherever You Go, There You Are*

# Practicing Gratitude

## A Message of Appreciation and Hope:

You do the best that you can with the resources you have.

Your love means everything to your family (even if they don't acknowledge it or say otherwise). Your love is enough.

Some days are harder than others. That's okay.

You deserve to be heard. Your feelings are real, important, and valid.

Being a caregiver is exhausting and can wear you down on many levels.

Take a moment to appreciate how important this job is. The work you do every day to support your family is incredible.

## Exercise

Choose one of the following prompts, and take a moment to write about what you are grateful for:

- List three things you are grateful for today
- Describe a mistake you made that you are now grateful for
- Write about something you accomplished recently, and how it made you feel
- Describe something that someone did recently that made you feel happy
- Write about something you're looking forward to

# Recognizing and Addressing Burnout

Caregiver burnout is very common. It describes a sense of emotional, mental, and physical exhaustion and distress that can happen when we take care of someone else. Here are some signs that you may be experiencing burnout:

- Physical/emotional fatigue, even with enough rest
- Changes in sleep patterns (either needing more or less)
- Decreased strength and stamina
- Changes in eating habits or appetite
- Getting sick more often
- Feelings of irritability, frustration, or anger
- Feelings of anxiety or overwhelm
- Feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, or isolation
- Difficulties with concentration and memory
- Withdrawal from friends and family
- Loss of intimacy
- Difficulty maintaining responsibilities

## Activities

If you experience burnout now or in the future, there are different strategies that may help you to feel better:

- Share your concerns with a health care provider
- Consider therapy
- Reach out to your friends and family
- Try to ask for/accept others' offers for help
- Seek out opportunities for rest
- Practice self-compassion
- Tune in to your daily health behaviours. Little changes can have big impacts:
  - o Move your body: stretch, walk, run, dance, play sports
  - o Drink lots of water and minimize caffeine intake
  - o Prioritize sleep
  - o Try to eat consistently with balanced and nutritious meals and snacks
  - o A short daily break/rest can boost mood and energy
- Prioritize time for yourself
- Develop a routine
- Focus on what you *can* do, and work toward accepting things you cannot change
- Engage in leisure and/or relaxation activities
- Remember, you are not alone.

One of the most powerful sources of resilience and wellbeing is a strong social support system. Support systems provide us with emotional and practical support and can greatly reduce burnout and enhance health and wellbeing. Caring for someone with FASD can be very isolating,

but growing and sustaining your support network helps to build a sense connection and community. Here are some [strategies](#) you may try to create and grow your social support system:

- Connect with a local support group
- Seek out group therapy
- Join a sports team or gym
- Find a hobby and connect with others with shared interests
- Volunteer
- Nurture your existing relationships: stay in touch, communicate clearly, show appreciation, respect boundaries, try to be available when they need help
- Keep a varied network: friends, family, mentors, colleagues, neighbours, roommates, service providers
- Connect with people virtually; access online resources

## Resources

Here are some additional resources that may be helpful in addressing burnout and building your social support network:

- List of [resources](#) from the Canadian Centre for Caregiving Excellence
- Caregiver stress [fact sheet](#)
- Information from KnowFASD about [caregiver burnout](#)
- [The importance of social support](#)
- [Research article](#) on self-compassion for caregivers of people with FASD
- [Self-care for caregivers](#)

# Tapping: An Emotional Freedom Technique

There is growing research on a self-help technique called *tapping* (Church et al., [2022](#)). This involves tapping your fingertips on different parts of your body to manage stressful feelings or thoughts. Although this technique has not been tested for caregivers of people with FASD, it has been shown to reduce feelings of stress, anxiety, and burnout in various groups of people.

## Exercise

If you'd like to try tapping for yourself, follow these steps (credit: [Alberta Health](#)):

1. Think of an issue that's bothering you. This could be any issue. For example, it could be something you're feeling anxious or sad about.
2. Measure how your issue makes you feel. Rate how bad you feel on a scale from 0 to 10. A score of 0 means you don't feel bad at all. But a score of 10 means you feel as bad as possible. Write down this number.
3. Create a statement that describes your issue, followed by a statement of self-acceptance. For example, you could say, "Even though I feel anxious about work tomorrow, I deeply and completely love and accept myself." Or you could say, "Even though my partner broke up with me, I love and accept myself."
4. Tap repeatedly on the edge of your palm, below your little finger. While you tap, say your statement out loud 3 times.
5. Now tap on the rest of the points on your body, one at a time. While you tap, state your issue over and over. For example, you might repeat "anxious about test" or "we broke up." Tap on each point in this order.
  - Tap on the top, centre of your head.
  - Tap on the inside edge of one eyebrow.
  - Tap next to the outside edge of one eye.
  - Tap on the bone underneath one eye.
  - Tap between your nose and your upper lip.
  - Tap between your lower lip and your chin.
  - Tap beneath one collarbone (find the notch beneath the inside edge of the collarbone).
  - Tap under one armpit (about 10 centimetres (4 inches) below the armpit).
6. Stop and remeasure how you feel about your issue.
7. Repeat the steps if needed.
8. Tap until you can give your issue a lower number, or until you feel better.

**Disclaimer:** This technique should not replace going to see a health professional for help with serious issues like depression or trauma. But you may find it's a tool you can use to help manage some of your thoughts and emotions.

For more information, here are a few videos that explain and demonstrate the tapping technique: [EFT: How it Works](#) and [The Tapping Solution](#).

# Mental Health First Aid Kit

Mental health first aid kits can be a helpful tool to reduce emotional distress and build resilience. They are intended to create a sense of safety, peace, calm & comfort, connectedness, self-empowerment, hope, and joy. Kits can be used by people of all ages.

## Exercise

Here are some tips for creating a mental health first aid kit of your own:

- Make it your own; you can add to it and change its contents any time
- Find a special spot to keep your kit; make it available and accessible
- Get your family involved in making up a first aid kit
- Put things in it that bring a sense of calmness and joy for each family member
- Add in a few surprise items so if a family member is very distressed or dysregulated, you can ask them to search for something new in the kit.
- You can create a mini "to go" version as well.

Some ideas for what to include in your kit:

- Breathing exercises
- Quotes that inspire and motivate you
- Pictures of happy memories
- Huggables
- Fidget toys
- Stress balls
- A cozy scarf or comforting garment or toy
- Mindfulness colouring sheets and crayons
- Peppermint tea or other comforting tea
- Scented candles, essential oils, or incense
- Mental health resources

## Resources

- Tips for keeping an [emotional first aid kit](#)
- Red Cross [psychological first aid guide](#)
- [Psychological first aid](#)
- Wellness Works [mental health first aid kits](#)
- [Medication Algorithm for FASD](#)



## Growth Mindset

A **growth mindset** is the belief that a person's skills, talents, and abilities can be improved with effort, strategies, and support. This contrasts from a fixed mindset, which is the believe that talents and skills are innate and unchangeable (Dweck, 2007; 2015). Growth mindset is often applied in educational contexts but is relevant across settings and life stages.

*"...Praising the process that [people] engage in: their effort, their strategies, their focus, their perseverance, their improvement. This process praise creates [people] who are hardy and resilient." – Carol Dweck*

### Exercise

Here are some examples of how we can encourage a growth mindset for the people we care for (credit: [MindsetWorks.com](https://www.mindsetworks.com/)):

Say This	Not That
"I can see you worked so hard on this!"	"You are so smart"
"It seems like it's time to try a new strategy."	"It's okay. Maybe you're just not cut out for this."
"I like watching you do that."	"You're a natural at that!"
"It looks like that was too easy for you. Let's find you something challenging so your brain can grow."	"That's right! You did that so quickly and easily; great job!"
"That's not right. You don't understand this yet. What strategies can you try to understand it better?"	"That's not right. Are you paying attention in class? It seems like you're not even trying."
"That was really hard. Your effort has paid off! Next time you'll be ready for this kind of challenge."	"That was really hard. I'm glad it's over and you don't have to do that again."
"You've worked hard to become a good writer. You should challenge yourself with an advanced class and learn something you don't know how to do yet."	"You have a real talent for writing. You should take a creative writing class because you're so good at it."

### Resources

- Video [presentation](#) from educator Kristin Wiens on growth mindset and FASD
- Resources on [Growth Mindset and Inclusion](#)
- Tips for developing a [Growth Mindset](#)

# Towards Healthy Outcomes

[Towards Healthy Outcomes](#) is a resource developed by researchers and community partners to support integrated intervention for people with FASD. This resource was made for individuals with FASD, caregivers, service providers, and others to help us reframe our thinking and adopt person-forward, strengths-based approaches to intervention geared towards goal attainment and growth.

It is based on the following beliefs and values:

- Individuals with FASD are capable of growth and can contribute meaningfully to their communities – and they are doing so
- Individuals with FASD have both strengths and needs
- The voice of living experience matters
- Our relationships and connections influence developmental outcomes
- We need shared understanding

## Resource

This resource can be used in many ways. For caregivers, it can help us to find a shared language, a structure for highlighting and organizing goals, and an approach to intervention among community members, people with living experience, and support systems.

[Access the full resource.](#)

