Caregiver Trauma & Resilience: Tips to Keep Caring

Compassionate and empathic people often lean toward caregiving roles. But these same traits that make for great caregivers of children who come from hard places also leave you vulnerable to experiencing secondary trauma and trauma of your own.

There have been several terms coined over the years to describe the stress of caring for someone who has experienced trauma. "Compassion fatigue," "trauma burnout," and "secondary trauma" are just a few examples. Literature often conflicts or overlaps with the definitions of these terms. However, there is an undeniable shared experience that nearly every compassionate parent or caregiver of a child who has suffered trauma knows. It is the feeling of always being on high alert, always trying to keep everyone regulated, always trying to avoid triggers, and always bracing for the unpredictable behaviors that come with trauma. It can become exhausting and, well, just plain traumatizing for the caregiver.

Recognizing the Signs

The day-in and day-out stress of caring for a child who has suffered trauma can take a toll physically, mentally, and emotionally. As one foster parent put it:

"I went from happy and carefree to being constantly anxious. Every time my phone rings, I immediately break out in a sweat and feel sick to my stomach, knowing it's the school saying she's had 'another incident' and that I have to leave work to pick her up. I know that her healing depends on me holding it together, but sometimes I feel like I want to run away."

Prolonged enough, the constant stress of working with a child who has trauma-driven behaviors can be debilitating for the parent or caregiver. Some signs you're experiencing caregiver trauma may include:

- Anxiety
- Irritability
- Chronic exhaustion
- Headaches, stomach aches, or other physical ailments
- Difficulty sleeping
- Panic attacks
- Decreased empathy
- Emotional detachment specifically toward the child in your care, even when you still feel empathy for others in your life
- Negativity
- Impaired decision-making or lack of trust in one's own judgment

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- Loss of pleasure in things you enjoy
- Feeling overwhelmed or defeated

Some parents find they need to shut down to make it through the day because they "just can't anymore." This experience even has a name: blocked care. It is a neurological response in which the brain's caregiving system essentially shuts down to protect itself from prolonged stress, repeated rejection, or relentless dysregulation. Blocked care is different from a bad day – it is a state in which the emotional connection to the child becomes genuinely difficult to access, even when the love is still there. Importantly, blocked care does not mean you have failed as a parent. It means you have been carrying too much for too long without enough support.

Without intervention, this constant stress – including blocked care – can result in a compromised ability to care for much more than just the child's basic daily needs. Parents then become ineffective in helping the child heal and develop healthy coping skills to replace the trauma behaviors.

Strategies for Resilience

We know that a child's healing doesn't happen overnight. So, how can parents and caregivers minimize the possibility of being traumatized while caring for a child with a trauma history?

- Seek out the help of a professional. Find a trauma-informed therapist or counselor.
- Find a safe, non-judgmental place to talk about what you're experiencing. Even confidential online groups can be enormously helpful.
- Build a strong support system of peers with shared experience who understand, such as fellow guardians, foster, kinship, or adoptive parents.
- Focus daily on the child's strengths and things you love about them. Challenge yourself to find something "going right" each day, even if it's a baby step. Identifying the child by challenging behaviors becomes too easy, and shifting the focus can help dramatically.
- Make time for self-care! Carve out time to read a book, laugh with a friend, get your nails done, or watch a football game uninterrupted. Do something that recharges your battery.
- Identify a trusted sitter or two who can give you short breaks regularly.
- Develop and practice "go-to" interventions to keep you regulated when your child isn't. And on the days when even those feel out of reach, give yourself permission to get through – surviving a hard day is not failure.
- Find humor in challenging situations. (One mom said that when her daughter was dysregulated, she would call her awful names. Rather than taking it personally, she would calmly challenge her daughter to develop more creative ones, sometimes even offering ridiculous suggestions.)

Asking for Help

Perhaps the most crucial strategy for coping with trauma is to be open and willing to reach out for help and support. Trauma is hard—really hard. No one can deal with or heal from trauma in a vacuum. The good news is that you're not alone.

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Don’t know where to go for support and resources? Please contact the Wisconsin Family Connections Center, and our Resource Specialists will be happy to help.

“I was finding that people in my usual support systems were not able to understand the emotional toll of parenting children who had experienced trauma and adversity. I was becoming more and more isolated and feeling less and less like myself. I knew I needed to find help for myself to continue to provide an environment for our children to heal from their pain.” —Wisconsin foster and adoptive mom

WISCONSIN FAMILY CONNECTIONS CENTER

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Resources

From the Resource Library

- Fostering Across Wisconsin Newsletter: On Trauma
- Fostering Across Wisconsin Newsletter: Circles of Support—Caregivers Need Care, Too
- Virtual Resource Kit: The Importance of Self-Care for Caregivers
- Handout: Prioritizing Self-Care

From the Champion Classrooms

- Compassion Resilience for Caregivers of Children
- Blocked Care: What To Do When You Run Out of Compassion
- Supporting the Caregiver to Help Youth Thrive
- Healing-Centered Engagement: The Power of Community and Connection

Inspiration & Hope From No Matter What Families

- It's Okay to Reach Out for Help
- Take Time to Recharge
- The Complexities of Caring

Additional Resources

- Compassion Fatigue Toolkit
- Compassion Fatigue Self-Assessment
- Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project

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