



# Caring for the Caregiver

**A guide by**  
**Autism**ONTARIO

# Self-Compassion for Caregivers

“Self-compassion is simply giving the same kindness to ourselves that we would give to others.”

– Christopher Germer

Research has shown that self-compassion can be considered a protective factor for parents of children on the autism spectrum. Adopting an approach of self-compassion when we are having a difficult time can lower our stress and improve our mental health or “psychological well-being” [1]. This approach has also been found to improve life satisfaction and help offer a sense of hope [2].

## Self-compassion involves:

1. Recognizing your distress or negative feelings (e.g., overwhelmed, inadequate, anxious, sad).
2. Recognizing that it is okay to feel distressed. In other words, sitting with negative feelings without being overwhelmed by them or judging them.
3. Taking a caring, comforting perspective towards yourself, the same way you would for a friend.

**Here is an example of a way to practice the skill of self-compassion. [Try it out!](#)**

## Other Resources:

- [Caring for Caregivers webinar series](#)
- [Self-compassion practices](#)
- [Videos about self-compassion for caregivers](#) (Part 12)



**Self-compassion is a skill that can be built and strengthened over time and with practice.**

It may look like saying or doing the same things you might do to comfort others, such as:

- Using gentle language with yourself
- Practicing self-soothing touch, such as holding your hands over your heart or putting your arms around yourself. “Such physical gestures have been shown to have immediate physical effects on our bodies in activating the soothing parasympathetic nervous system” [3].

# Mindfulness for Caregivers

Mindfulness is an approach to mental health where people pay attention to the moment and bring awareness to their feelings, thoughts, and senses [1]. The idea is that we are better able to manage our overwhelming thoughts and emotions when we are aware of them, and they can come and go [2].

Mindfulness activities have been shown to improve well-being and mental health in caregivers [3][4].

## Mindfulness involves [5]:

1. Slowing down and focusing on your internal and external environments. What is happening inside and outside of your body?
2. Being non-judgmental and accepting of what you are experiencing.

## Other Resources:

- [Mindfulness exercises](#)
- [Headspace App](#): meditation and mindfulness exercises to help reduce feelings of stress
- [Mindfulness activities](#)
- [Videos about mindfulness for caregivers](#) (Parts I0 and II)
- [An Autism-Informed Approach to Mindfulness webinar](#)



**There are two types of mindfulness exercises: meditation-type exercises or mindful activities of daily living (e.g., mindful eating or walking).**

Meditation (SAAAC CARES group):

- [Loving Kindness Meditation](#)
- [Full Body Scan and Gratitude for Self](#)

Mindful Activities of Daily Living:

- Mindful eating: Eat a meal or have a snack without any other distractions (e.g., TV, cell phones, etc.). Pay attention to how you are chewing, what the food tastes like, and the different sensations that you experience. How does this experience make you feel?
- Mindful walking: Go outside for a walk and pay attention to your surrounding environment using all your senses. Notice what you see, hear, smell, taste, and feel. How does this experience make you feel?

# The Importance of Finding Joy for Caregivers

Joy, laughter, and humor are all considered 'protective factors' for caregivers [1]. This means that finding joy and happiness in your life can support your mental health and improve your well-being. Being a caregiver is often stressful, and it can be important to change our routines and find ways to increase joy [2].

## Here are some ideas of things to try:

1. Slowing down and focusing on your internal and external environments. What is happening inside and outside of your body?
2. Being non-judgmental and accepting of what you are experiencing.

### Why try it?

**Learn a new skill or try a new hobby**

There is joy in novelty

**Participate in physical activity**

Exercising promotes endorphins and increases positive feelings

**Volunteer**

Bring meaning to your life by giving back to your community

## Other Resources:

- [Joy Generator](#)
- AIDE Canada Toolkit: [Caring for the Caregivers of Individuals with Intellectual and/or Developmental Disabilities](#)
- AIDE Canada: [Peer Advice Videos](#)
- [Mental Health Caregiver Guide](#) (Workbook Pages 21–27)



## Hear other stories of caregivers finding their joy [3].

[Watch Peer Advice Videos](#) developed by Canadian self-advocates from the autism community.

## Self-reflection questions to help focus on the positive [3]:

- What success has your child/family had recently?
- How have you advocated for your family member? How have you helped give them a voice?
- Who works well with your child? Is there a teacher, therapist, or doctor who has made a big difference?
- What do you and your child/family like to do together? When was the last time you smiled together?

# Seeking Support and Connection for Caregivers

There is a common phrase that says, “it takes a village to raise a child.” As a caregiver, you are not alone in supporting your child (although it may feel like it from time to time). If you are feeling alone, it can be helpful to check in with people who care about you. The people in your support network can offer advice, support, and/or a listening ear.

It can also be helpful to connect with other parents or caregivers with similar experiences. Caregivers report feeling reassured by speaking with someone who has “been there,” whether in person, by telephone, or through social media [1][2][3].



## Creating a Support Network: Who is in Yours?

### Informal Supports

- Family (including spouse/partner/co-parent; extended family)
- Friends
- Neighbours

### Unique Supports

- Psychoeducational and peer support programs (e.g. CARES)
- Social media support groups
- Faith or spiritual group

### Formal Supports

- Respite care
- Case manager; service navigator; care coordinator; Social Worker
- Medical professional (family doctor; pediatrician; specialist)
- Educator (classroom teacher, resource teacher, school staff, Early Childhood Educator)
- Professionals (Behaviour Analyst, Speech Language Pathologist, Occupational Therapist, Physiotherapist)
- Counselor or therapist
- Community service agencies
- Other support workers

# Seeking Support and Connection for Caregivers

Complete this worksheet by thinking about how you can strengthen your present relationships and make new connections.

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| What help do I need?                            | Who can help me?        | How can they help me?                     |
|---|-------------------------|---|
| Talk to someone                                 | My best friend          | Over coffee or the phone                  |
| Walking the dog                                 | My neighbour's daughter | I will pay her \$10 a week                |
| Respite (i.e., a break from my caregiving role) | My mother-in-law        | She will come over one Saturday per month |
| Cleaning  | My other children       | I will make a chore chart                 |
|   |                         |   |
|   |                         |   |
|   |                         |   |
|   |                         |   |
|   |                         |   |

## Other Resources:

- Videos about parent-to-parent support and social supports (Parts 5 and 6): [Combating Compassion Fatigue for Families and Caregivers of Children with Special Needs](#)
- AIDE Canada Parent Advice Video: [What is Respite? Do I need it?](#)
- AIDE Canada Toolkit: [Caring for the Caregiver](#)

# Caring for the Caregiver Resource List

## Autism Ontario Webinars and Resources

- [Ask the Doctor: Autism and Mental Health – A Focus on Caregivers](#)
- [Caring for Caregivers](#) (webinar series)
- [Wellness and Self-Care Session Part I: For Parents and Caregivers of People on the Autism Spectrum](#)
- [An Autism-Informed Approach to Mindfulness](#)
- [Moving Past the Pandemic: Considerations for Autistic Children and Caregivers in Canada](#)

## AIDE Canada Resources

- [Peer Advice Videos](#)
- [Caring for the Caregivers of Individuals with Intellectual and/or Developmental Disabilities](#)

## Other Online Resources

- [Combating Compassion Fatigue for Families and Caregivers of Children with Special Needs](#)
- [Practical Tips for Helping Families Reduce Stress](#)

## Research Links

- [Perceived Stress among Caregivers of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder: A State-Wide Study](#)
- [Parenting Stress in Caregivers of Young Children with ASD Concerns Prior to a Formal Diagnosis](#)
- [Caregiver Burnout, Gaps in Care, and COVID-19](#)
- [Defining Crisis in Families of Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders](#)

If you have any additional questions or are seeking further information about the content of this resource, please contact [sme@autismontario.com](mailto:sme@autismontario.com).