# CARING FOR YOURSELF WHILE CARING FOR YOUR CHILD'S MENTAL HEALTH

A Guide to Resilience and Effective Communication











With Expert Tips and Advice from Registered Psychiatrist and CEO of Future Ready Minds:

Dr. Shimi Kang MD, FRCPC



## Welcome to Stigma-Free Mental Health Society's Caregiver Manual

Caregiving can be a deeply fulfilling experience and is an opportunity to truly make a difference in someone's life. At the same time, it often comes with a unique set of demands and challenges that may feel difficult to keep up with. You may feel like you're carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders – and at times, unsure where to turn for help. As a caregiver, the support you offer plays an important role in others' mental health journeys. Yet, it's important to recognize that your well-being matters just as much.

This manual was created to support you in balancing your own mental health while you care for someone who is facing mental health challenges. While many of the strategies are designed for parents, guardians, and caregivers supporting youth, they can be easily adapted and are applicable to all types of caregivers. You'll find practical tips and printable activities that will help you build resilience and communicate more effectively with the individual in your care.

Throughout this manual, you'll find expert advice and resources from Dr. Shimi Kang, a leading voice in youth mental health. You'll also gain tools for the whole family to encourage healthy habits while destigmatizing mental health and creating deeper connections.

As you work to support your loved one's mental health, we hope this manual helps you find balance and strength - both for yourself and the person you are caring for.

## Finding Balance and Preventing Burnout

## **Proactive Strategies to Avoid Burnout**

The good news is that burnout is not inevitable. You can take steps to prevent it, starting with building resilience. Resilience is your ability to cope with life's challenges, adapt to change, and bounce back from setbacks. It's a skill that can be cultivated with intention and practice. Below, you'll learn about the **7 Cs of Resilience**, a framework that can help you build sustainable self-care habits.

#### 1. Competence

Having the ability to manage daily challenges is key to preventing burnout. Try reflecting on the skills you already have as a caregiver and continue to actively learn and grow your skillset over time. This can help you feel capable and less overwhelmed, even in difficult situations.

#### 2. Confidence

Confidence can be built up through experience and small successes. Celebrate yourself for making progress, even the "baby steps." Each act of care, even simply listening or providing comfort for a few moments, can help strengthen your confidence as a caregiver. Give yourself credit for the tasks you handle well – you deserve it!

#### 3. Connection

Feeling supported also helps us feel resilient and reduces isolation, a common contributor to caregiver burnout. Having a solid community to lean on offers a safety net when times get tough. Share your feelings with a professional or someone you trust when you feel it would be beneficial for your well-being.

## Finding Balance and Preventing Burnout

#### 4. Character

A strong sense of character provides a moral foundation for coping with life's challenges. It helps you stay aligned with your personal values. For caregivers, this means making choices in your role that reflect your values and support what is best for your child or the person you are caring for.

#### 5. Contribution

Giving to others and making a positive impact is part of contributing, but this C is also about asking for help in addition to offering it. Don't hesitate to accept assistance from others when they offer. Recharging your own energy allows you to continue being an effective caregiver.

#### 6. Coping

Stress management is a critical part of maintaining resilience. Healthy coping mechanisms may include practicing mindfulness, staying physically active, or taking quiet moments to be alone and reset.

#### 7. Control

Focus on what you can control rather than what you can't. While caregiving can often feel unpredictable, there are aspects of your daily routine that are in your control, like setting boundaries, having a personal self-care plan, or choosing how to react to challenges. Take comfort in knowing you have the ability to make empowered choices.

To put the 7Cs into practice, see the accompanying 7 Cs Worksheet for Resilience in the Appendix. This activity will help you reflect on each area and apply it to your caregiving journey.

### **Self-Compassion and Accepting Imperfection**

As caregivers, we often have high expectations for ourselves. We want to be everything to everyone, but this can quickly lead to exhaustion and self-criticism. It's important to practice self-compassion and treat yourself with the same kindness that you would offer a loved one.

Caregiving is tough, and no one expects you to be perfect.

Embrace your imperfections and know that it's okay to give yourself permission to take breaks when you need them.

Resilience isn't about being "invincible." It's about recognizing your limits and giving yourself grace when you reach them. By implementing the **7 Cs of resilience** and practicing self-compassion, you can find balance and prevent burnout as you support your loved one.

#### **Expert Tip:**



Resilience and creativity are two sides of the same coin. Get creative with more ideas for you and others to find balance and prevent burnout.



## Emotional Well-Being for Both You and Your Child

The connection between your emotional health and your child's emotional health is stronger than you might think! Youth are highly attuned to the mood and behaviors of the adults around them. If you're feeling stressed or burnt out, your child may sense those emotions, which can affect their mental state and behaviour.



When you prioritize your own mental health, you create a positive environment that supports your child's well-being too.



Simply modeling healthy habits and emotional regulation helps show your child how to manage their own feelings and develop coping skills. Your emotional stability creates a sense of safety and consistency that is beneficial for their well-being and yours.

## Emotional Well-Being for Both You and Your Child

## **Encouraging Healthy Habits**

Supporting your child's mental health also involves encouraging habits that promote their physical and emotional well-being. Some helpful habits include:



#### **Outdoor time:**

Fresh air, natural light, and time in nature have been shown to reduce stress and improve mood.



#### Intentional screen time:

Excessive screen time before bedtime can interfere with sleep and potentially exacerbate mental health challenges. Encourage balanced tech use that enhances well-being and doesn't take away from beneficial in-person activities.



#### **Social connection:**

Strong relationships with peers and family boost well-being. Setting up playdates or extracurricular activities can help your child build healthy social skills.

#### Movement and creativity:

Physical activity and creative outlets like drawing, writing, or playing an instrument promote emotional regulation and stress relief.



If your child is hesitant to try building new habits or doesn't recognize their benefits right away, start small and focus on what interests them. Offer them choices and implement just one or two activities they may enjoy.

When they choose the activity themselves and it feels fun, they may be more open to it, especially as they start to notice it helps them feel better.

## Emotional Well-Being for Both You and Your Child

### **Shared Self-Care: Practices You Can Do Together**

One of the best ways to reinforce positive habits is to make them a part of your family routine. Shared self-care not only strengthens your own mental health, but it also nurtures a deeper connection with your child.

Simple activities like **taking a walk together**, **practicing deep breathing**, or **trying a new activity** as a family can improve everyone's mood and create bonding time. You may also consider a **family workout or yoga session**.



To help you choose and integrate self-care practices, check out the activities in the Appendix, such as the Family Mental Health Plan, which provides tools to support everyone's mental health. The Caregiver Reflection journal prompts will help you consider what you were taught about emotional well-being growing up, how these messages impacted you in the past, and teachings you would like to pass on to your child.

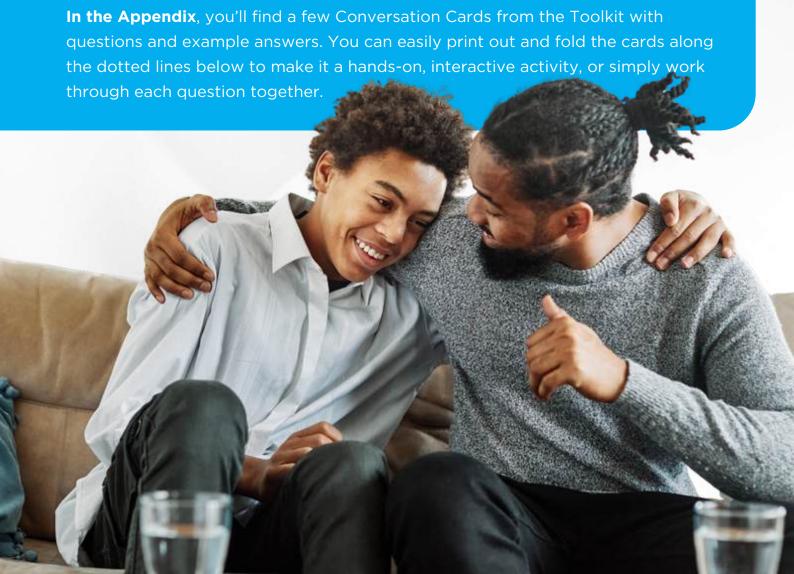
## **Effective Communication at Home**

Open and supportive communication is a key part of any healthy relationship, particularly when it comes to supporting your child or loved one. Here are some tips to ensure your child feels heard while improving communication within your family.

#### **Creating Space for Conversations About Mental Health**

Talking about mental health is especially necessary when someone in your family is facing challenges, and it doesn't have to be daunting. The first step is facilitating a non-judgmental environment where these conversations can happen naturally.

One way to start these discussions is by using prompts that make it easier for everyone to express their feelings. The Conversation Cards on our Student Mental Health Toolkit are a great tool to introduce into your family's routine. Try setting aside a few minutes to "pull a card" and talk about the topic.



## **Effective Communication at Home**

## Active Listening and Validation Techniques

Listening is just as important as talking in effective communication. Active listening means giving your full attention to the speaker, acknowledging their feelings, and responding in a way that helps them feel heard.



#### Try the following strategies to practice this:

- Reflect back what you've heard: "It sounds like you're feeling frustrated because..."
- Ask clarifying questions: "Can you tell me more about that?"
- Offer empathy: "I can see why that would be tough."

Validation is also key in communication. It's essential that your child feels their emotions are valid no matter what they're going through. Rather than minimizing their feelings, acknowledge them with phrases like, "I can understand why you feel that way" or "It's okay to feel upset. Let's work through this together." Validation doesn't mean agreeing with everything; rather, the purpose is to signal to your child that their feelings matter.





## **Emotional Regulation Tips**

Managing emotions may be challenging at times for both you and your child. Teaching emotional regulation techniques can help reduce stress and prevent overwhelming feelings from taking over.

#### Here are a few techniques that can help both of you stay calm:

- **Deep breathing:** A simple way to regain control is through deep, mindful breathing. Encourage your child to inhale for a count of 4, hold for 4, and exhale for 4.
- **Grounding exercises:** Grounding helps you focus on the present moment through paying attention to physical sensations (e.g., naming items you see in your environment or noticing the feeling of your feet on the ground).
- **Progressive muscle relaxation:** From head to toe, tense and then relax different muscle groups to release built-up tension.



#### **Tools to Track Well-Being**

Regular check-ins are a great way to stay in tune with your child's mental health. Use the Monthly Family Check-In in the Appendix to create a family ritual where everyone can express how they're doing, share moments of gratitude, and discuss any challenges they might be facing. This can help you identify any stressors early, before they escalate.

For ongoing reflection, consider using the Daily Mood Tracker to help the person you are caring for track their emotional state each day. By understanding patterns in mood and behavior, both you and your child can identify triggers and develop strategies to manage them.

#### **Further Support**

For even more communication strategies, check out the <u>Talking to Your Child</u> <u>About Mental Health</u> section in the Parents, Guardians, and Caregivers section of the Student Mental Health Toolkit. Here, you'll find additional guidance on how to approach sensitive topics with your child and ensure the conversation is productive and supportive.



#### **Expert Tip:**



Play is a wonderful way to connect and replenish energy. Recreation allows us to recreate so try fun, playful activities with your loved one.

## You Are Not Alone

If there is one word of encouragement you take away from this manual, it's that caring for yourself and asking for support is not a sign of weakness or selfishness. They are normal and necessary steps towards creating a healthier environment for both you and your loved one. Reducing the stigma around seeking help is essential – not only for the person you're

caring for, but for you.

Above all, know that you are not alone in this. Caring for someone requires immense strength, patience, and love. It's important to acknowledge the dedication and hard work you put in every day. In case you haven't been told today, your work as a caregiver matters. We thank you for the incredible role you play in the lives of those you care for.



## APPENDIX (PRINTABLE ACTIVITIES)





#### **Activity 1: Build Your Own Family Mental Health Plan**

This worksheet will help you create a personalized mental health plan in collaboration with your child and family or the person you are caring for. Together, you'll identify coping strategies and shared activities that serve everyone's well-being.

Each family member should have their own copy to fill out, and you can discuss your responses as you work through the steps together as a group. This helps ensure everyone's preferences and needs are included in the plan.

#### **Daily Wellness Plan**

A daily wellness plan helps the whole family maintain their mental health even when things are going well. It consists of self-care activities that keep you all on track.

#### What does a "good day" look like for you?

Think about the everyday things that make you feel calm and supported. This could be going for a walk, listening to music, or having quiet time after school.

#### What Helps Me Feel Well:

•	Something that helps me feel calm:
•	Something that gives me energy:
•	Something that helps me connect with others:
•	A way I like to unwind at the end of the day:

#### **Create Your Calendar**

Let's create a daily plan that includes those moments. Together, choose 1 - 3 of the things above and decide when to include them in your day.

Time of Day	Activity
Morning	
After school/work	
Evening/bedtime	



#### **Stressors and Coping Map**

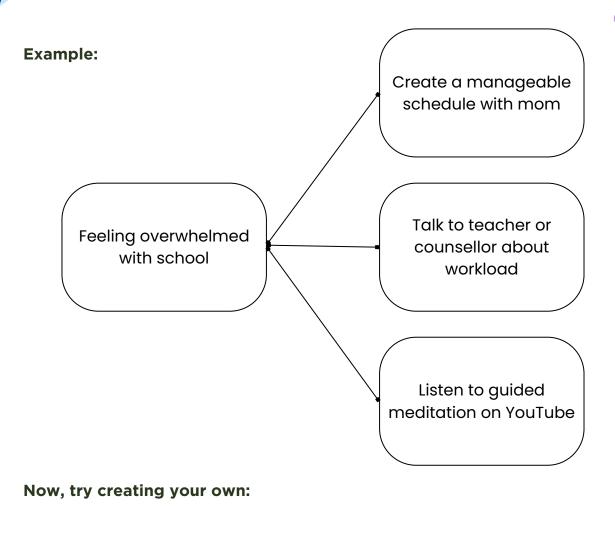
Understanding common causes of stress for everyone can help the family manage situations before they escalate. For this activity, you'll brainstorm common stressors and ways to cope with them together.

Examples:  Overwhelmed with work responsibilities/homework  Feeling left out  Arguing with siblings
Step 2: Brainstorm coping strategies  Now that you've identified stressors, think about ways they can be managed What are some go-to activities that help you feel better in these situations?

Talking to a parent or trusted friend Journaling Deep breathing

#### Step 3: Brainstorm together! Create your own coping map.

Make a visual map of your family's potential stressors and strategies. The purpose of this activity is to help everyone feel empowered to deal with difficult emotions and understand one another's needs.







#### **Crisis Plan**

Local Resources/Crisis Lines:

Organization: \_\_\_\_\_Phone number: \_\_\_\_\_

Understanding the signs of a mental health crisis and having a clear plan in place helps ensure that everyone is adequately supported and can get care quickly when needed.						
What does a mental health crisis look like for you/for each of us?						
Describe the emotions and warning signs that may indicate someone is in crisis and immediate support is needed.						
What can we do to help during a mental health crisis?						
List the best ways to support the person who is in crisis - this may include						
specific strategies that were recommended by your healthcare professional or						
behaviours that have been effective in the past.						
What support is available when someone is in crisis?						
Crisis Resources List						
Emergency Contact:						
Name: Phone number:						
Mental Health Professional:						
Name: Phone number:						



#### **Activity 2: Monthly Family Check-In**

This monthly ritual helps your family express their appreciation for one another and gently surface any areas of stress or change before they escalate.

Set aside 30-60 minutes each month (maybe during a meal or quiet evening) and talk through the prompts together.

#### How Are We Doing as a Family?

- How are things going for us as a family this month?
- Did we have any stressful or difficult moments? How did we handle them?
- Is there anything we need more of or less of from each other?

#### **Appreciation and Connection**

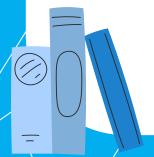
Have each person answer:

- What's one thing we/I did for you this month that made you feel loved, appreciated, or supported?
- What's something you're proud of yourself for this month?

#### **Goals for the Coming Month**

- Is there anything we want to focus on (communication, screen time, bedtime routines, etc.)?
- Schedule one fun activity we can do together this month!

Ideas: Movie or game night, family bake-off, day trip, hike







### **Activity 3: Conversation Cards**

Below are a few Conversation Cards from our Student Mental Health Toolkit with questions and example answers. This activity helps you kickstart discussions about mental health with your family. You can easily print out and fold the cards along the dotted lines below to make it a hands-on, interactive activity, or simply work through each question together.

## What is mental health?

Mental health is part of our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. We all have mental health. Our mental health affects how we think, feel, and behave. It also helps us figure out how we deal with stress, interact with others, and make all kinds of choices. Mental health is important throughout your whole life.

#### What is mental illness?

A mental illness is a diagnosable mental health condition that affects the brain. It changes the way you think, feel and behave. Absolutely anyone can have a mental illness. 1 in 4 Canadians will experience some type of mental illness.

#### How can we take care of our mental health?

Everyone takes care of their mental health in different ways. It is good to make sure you **practice self-care**, **take breaks**, **and don't push yourself too hard**. It also helps to **stay connected with friends and family** so that you don't feel alone.

#### Why is it important we talk about mental health?

The first step to breaking the stigma of mental health is talking about it. Talking about it helps to normalize it and encourages others to express their feelings have these conversations. When more people reach out for help, they are more likely to get the support they need.



### **Activity 4: The 7 Cs Worksheet for Resilience**

Use this worksheet to reflect on each of the 7 Cs and ways you can build your resilience as a caregiver. Be honest with yourself and take this opportunity to celebrate your strengths while identifying areas for growth.

#### 1. Competence

Which caregiving skills do you feel competent at? (Check all that apply)

- Managing daily routines
- Communicating with healthcare providers
- Managing medications
- Providing emotional support
- Handling mental health crises

•	Other:			

Which skills would you like to improve? How can you develop these skills?

#### 2. Confidence

Think back to a recent caregiving success or "win" you had, no matter how small. What did you accomplish?

Brainstorm 3 ways you can celebrate your wins as a caregiver. These can be anything that help you pause and give yourself recognition for the amazing job

you are doing. Commit to doing one each time you succeed:

- •
- \_\_\_\_\_
- •

#### 3. Connection

Create a list of people you feel safe sharing your feelings with. These could be friends, family members, or health professionals. Who are the trusted people/resources you can reach out to when you need support?

- •
- •
- •





## **Activity 4: The 7 Cs Worksheet for Resilience**

#### 4. Character

From the list below, circle up to 10 values that matter most to you as a caregiver:

Compassion
Patience
Honesty
Courage
Respect
Responsibility
Kindness
Perseverance
Empathy
Gratitude
Humility
Trustworthiness
Fairness
Generosity
Forgiveness
Loyalty
Open-mindedness
Self-discipline
Optimism
Other:
How can you stay aligned with these values when you are faced with difficult
caregiving situations?

#### 5. Contribution

Outside of caregiving, what are some ways you can make a positive impact, both for others and yourself?



## **Activity 4: The 7 Cs Worksheet for Resilience**

#### 6. Coping

What are your current coping strategies? (Check all that apply)

- Meditation
- Quiet/alone time
- Exercise/going for walks
- Deep breathing
- Journaling
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Choose two strategies you can fit into your routine and commit to practicing on a regular basis:

#### 7. Control

Think of challenging situations in your caregiving experience that feel out of your control and cause you frustration. For each, write one way you would like to react to the situation or set a boundary if it happens again in the future:

Out of control:

Reaction/boundary:

Out of control:

Reaction/boundary:

Closing reflection:

Considering the 7Cs, what is one small step you can take this week to strengthen your resilience?

## **Activity 5: What I Was Taught/What I Choose**

This printable journaling tool helps caregivers reflect on the messages they received about mental health and stigma in their youth, and what they would now like to model for their child or person they are caring for. Use the prompts below to explore your own experiences and set an intention about what you would like to convey to your child.

Reflection:
What did! learn about mental health growing up? Consider what was said (or not said) about mental health in your community of culture.
What messages did I receive about expressing emotions?
How were people who struggled with mental health treated or talked about?
This was helpful/not helpful for me because
Intention: What do I want to model for the child/person I am caring for now?
What messages do I want to give them about mental health and expressing their emotions?
How can I create a home/care environment that supports open communication

### **Activity 6: Daily Mood Tracker**

Activity 6: Daily Mood Tracker

This Mood Tracker is a visual way to become more aware of day-to-day variations in your mood and identify patterns. Caregivers can have their child complete this activity on their own or use it alongside them as a shared practice.

Each day, check in with yourself. Mark the emoji that most closely matches how you are feeling. Then, write a quick note about why you felt that way or what helped.

Day	Нарру	Okay	Frustrated	Sad	Tired	Notes/ What Helped Me Today
Monday						
Tuesday						
Wednesday						
Thursday						
Friday						
Saturday						
Sunday						

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**AUTHOR: MONIQUE ZIZZO**