

The logo for Kinship Carers Victoria, featuring a stylized blue flower or leaf design to the left of the text.

Kinship
Carers
VICTORIA

Wellbeing

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magazine

Edition #5



SELF-CARE FOR KINSHIP CARERS

Dear Kinship Carer,

This magazine has been released to commemorate Kinship Care Week 2021. It focuses on the need for kinship carers to recognise that they have an obligation and a right to look after their own wellbeing.

KCV hopes that kinship carers use this magazine as a prompt to act on their self-care. There is a two-step process available that assists in starting self-care planning.

1: Providing feedback on this magazine will automatically put you in the draw to win one of 100 \$20 vouchers.

2: Joining the KCV self-care community will entitle you to support and gifts available between September 2021 and September 2022. At this early stage only 50 people will be able to join this community.



This symbol indicates an activity to be completed.

Kinship Carers Victoria
14 Youlden St, Kensington. 3031
Phone: (03) 9372 2422
Email: director@grandparents.com.au
www.kinshipcarersvictoria.org



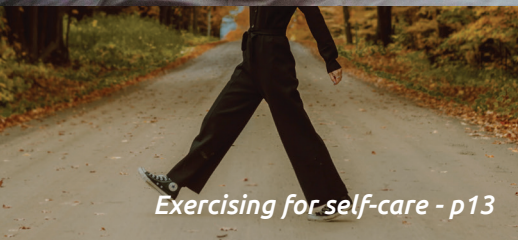
Kinship Carers Victoria
is supported by the Victorian Government.

*Cover photo of a hydrangea by Tiffany Chan on Unsplash.
Hydrangeas symbolise gratitude, honesty and deep understanding.*

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Self-care for kinship carers



In airline safety briefings, passengers are told to put on their own oxygen masks before attempting to help others. Likewise, kinship carers need to take care of their own needs first, enabling them to be able to assist others.

Remember:

- Self-care is not the same as self-indulgence
- It's alright to ask for help if you need it
- Keep up social contacts
- It's alright to say 'no'
- Be kind to yourself – we all make mistakes, so forgive yourself and move on
- Celebrate small victories
- Take a break before you reach breaking point
- Give yourself regular rewards
- Do something special that makes you feel good

In order to fulfill their demanding role, kinship carers need to establish a balance in life that makes time and funds available to maintain their capacity to keep going. It is hoped this booklet will assist kinship carers to act to improve their own self-care.



Contact Kinship Carers Victoria to find out the location of your nearest support group.

Remember, kinship care support groups can provide a friendly space where you can meet others, have a break, find information and get support from people who know your situation.

Also, remember that Kinship Carers Victoria will provide a sympathetic ear and advice. Calling KCV every once in a while can be part of your self-care plan.

Developing a self-care plan

The KCV self-care plan is a tool created by individual kinship carers. It should include a range of activities, including connection to people and community. Remember: *those who fail to plan, plan to fail.*



Bear in mind when developing a self-care plan that:

Positive is better than negative

When making a self-care plan it is important to include activities that are positive and able to be practised in supportive environments

Prevention is better than cure

By designing a plan at a time when you are not in crisis, you're directing your best self to reflect on what you may need in your worst moments. The reality is that only YOU know how intense your stress levels can get and what resources are available to you.

Planning is better than floundering

Having a plan takes the guesswork out of what to do and where to turn in moments of crisis. It helps you respond instead of react to the situation at hand. You'll find it easier to stick to your self-care if you have a plan that establishes a routine. When you have a plan in place, you'll feel more in control of your circumstances and life won't feel quite as chaotic. (It also makes it easier to ask for help from those you may share your plan with.)

Listen to the KCV podcast #15 on self-care

Podcast #15 features psychologist Dr Melissa Weinberg from the Dept. of Psychology at Deakin University, an expert in the science of wellbeing and resilience.

The podcast also features two kinship carers talking about their own experiences with carer burnout, including what they were able to do to alleviate it.



Covid-19 survival strategies favoured by kinship carers

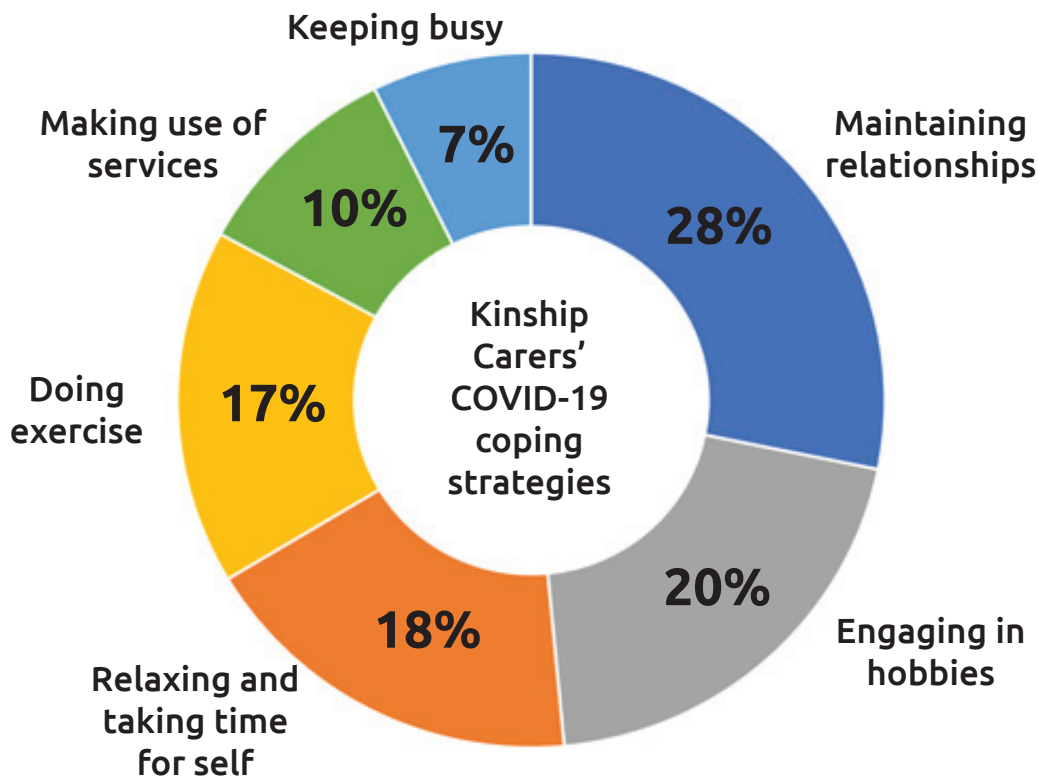
Self-care for Thriving



Kinship carers coped with COVID-19 lockdowns remarkably well. KCV staff were impressed with the selfless attitude of carers during these times.

However, carers' positive attitude alone did not get them through the crisis. They also employed some coping strategies, which they shared with KCV. Nearly 400 strategies were documented. They fell into six types of activities, as depicted below.


It is significant that kinship carers instinctively relied on positive relationships to get them through. All medical evidence tells us about the link between positive relationships and wellbeing.



Building a personalised self-care plan


It is quite easy to develop a self-care plan; the hardest part might be deciding to do so. Here are three easy steps to take once you start.

Step 1 | Evaluate indicators of stress and coping strategies

When faced with challenges, we can use positive coping strategies or negative strategies. Below are examples of each.  Highlight which positive/negative strategies apply to you.


Coping strategies	Indicators of stress
Deep breathing	Yelling
Listening to music	Smoking
Exercising	Pacing
Meditation	Skipping meals
Reading	Drinking alcohol to excess
Connecting with others	Withdrawal from friends/family
Engaging in a hobby	Biting fingernails

Step 2 | Analyse areas to work on

 Highlight the areas listed below that need to be given attention.

- Physical health
- Mental health
- Relationships and social life
- Spiritual health

Step 3 | Develop a self-care plan

 Create a plan with different activities which includes relationship-building activities. Use your plan and note what was most helpful and enjoyable.

Forms to help you craft a self-care plan are included at the end of this book.

Be practical, asking:

- Will I really use this idea?
- Do I have the time?
- Has this worked in the past?

Relationships – the secret to health and happiness



In 1938 scientists at Harvard University commenced tracking 268 male students in a longitudinal study designed to reveal the secrets to health and happiness.¹ The study continues to this day.

The original recruits included President John F Kennedy and long-time *Washington Post* editor Ben Bradlee. Although some participants went on to become successful businessmen, doctors, lawyers, and others ended up as schizophrenics or alcoholics, their pathways were not predictable.

The most significant finding is that happiness in relationships is a powerful influence on health. Relationships are what keep people happy, protect them from stress and help to delay mental/physical decline. Healthy relationships are better predictors of long and happy lives than social class, IQ, or even genes.

Analysis of the Harvard data found that:

- **People's satisfaction with their relationships** at age 50 was a better predictor of physical health in later life than their cholesterol levels.
- **Marital satisfaction** has a protective effect on people's mental health. People who had happy marriages in their 80s reported that their moods didn't suffer, even on the days when they had more physical pain. Those who had unhappy marriages felt more emotional and physical pain.
- **Those with strong social support** experienced less mental deterioration as they aged.

Positive relationships also lead to:

- **Less overall stress** – Support provided by friends and family can be a buffer against stress.
- **Better healing** – A little support can go a long way toward helping a person recover.
- **Healthier behaviours** – If friends and family encourage healthy behaviours, such as eating a healthy diet or exercising, the positive behaviour is more likely to be followed.
- **Greater sense of purpose** – Many people strive to feel productive through collective action in relation to something bigger than themselves. Having a sense of purpose can actually add years to your life.

¹ Harvard Study of Adult Development, 1983

Ten rules for maintaining relationships

'...having one or two close, meaningful relationships can make a positive difference to your mental and physical health.'

1. **Be authentic.** Don't deny your beliefs and point of view for the sake of fitting in.
2. **Accept others for who they are.** Remember we all want people in our lives who love us for who we are.
3. **Seek balance in your friendships.** Entering a relationship with selfish motives and being a person who takes is likely to lead to a lonely life. Support the people in your life.
4. **Make time for your friends.** Making time for your friends sends the message that they are important to you. If you can't see them in person, send a letter, email, or give them a call.
5. **Be empathetic.** Trying to understand things from your friend's point of view can help you communicate and know each other better.
6. **Express your gratitude.** Let your friends know that you value their friendship. Tell them.
7. **Keep your promises.** If you know you can't do something, don't promise that you will.
8. **Keep personal information confidential.** If a friend tells you a secret it is because they trust you.
9. **Admit and apologise.** If you do something wrong, admit it. Sometimes when a friend is upset, all they want from you is for you to say 'sorry'.
10. **Let go.** Did a friend do something that hurt you? Were apologies made? Let go and move on!

 **Contact KCV for a copy of the discussion paper on loneliness on (03) 9372 2422.**

Ten tips for getting a good sleep



Good quality sleep is a critical element of wellbeing.

★ **Make a special plan to guarantee better quality sleep by highlighting a few of the strategies below you could employ.**

1. In the evening, dim lights to promote production of melatonin, a hormone that tells your body when to sleep.
2. Maintain a regular sleeping pattern. Aim to go to bed and wake up at the same time every day.
3. Don't take naps during the day, as this may reduce your ability to sleep at night.
4. Make your sleeping environment and bed as comfortable as possible. Your bedroom should be dark, cool (around 16-18°C) and quiet.
5. Use your bed only for sleep (and sex). Avoid activities like watching television, studying or eating so that your brain will not associate your bed with being awake.
6. Turn off all screens at least 30 minutes before bedtime. The light from screens prevents your brain from producing the chemicals it needs to get to sleep.
7. Avoid distracting noises and lights or engaging in mentally stimulating activities before bed. You should feel relaxed before bed. Taking a warm bath may help you unwind.
8. Exercise during the day. Exercising just before bedtime can keep you awake.
9. Avoid taking stimulants before bed, including caffeine, nicotine and alcohol. Alcohol may worsen snoring or sleep apnoea, cause fragmented sleep or wake you up too early.
10. Do not eat too much or too little before bed. Don't eat heavy, spicy or sugary food.



Avoid stimulants like caffeine before going to bed.

Seven more stress relievers

Relaxing for self-care



Include a few of these stress relievers in your self-care plan.

1. Identify at least one good thing that happened each day. Jot down the things for which you are grateful for every day – it brings about an energy shift, and whatever seemed awful tends to become less daunting.
2. Nurture a plant – a little greenery in your space can help lower blood pressure. Succulents can be inexpensive, low maintenance, and thrive indoors.
3. Listen to music – any music you like will work. Findings indicate that music can cause the brain to synchronise with the beat causing brainwaves which are present when we are relaxed and conscious.
4. Take time to laugh – laughter can not only relieve tension but also improves immune function. Laughter first activates your stress response and then deactivates it, creating a kind of 'rollercoaster' that leads to relaxation.
5. Try progressive muscle relaxation – start with your toes and work your way up: tighten your foot muscles, then relax them. Make your way up your body, until you finish with your face.
6. Focus on your senses a few minutes a day – focus only on what's going on in the present. Pay attention to your senses: what you see, feel, hear, and smell. This is referred to as 'grounding' and can make a huge difference in your emotional and physical wellbeing when done daily.
7. Plan ahead – if the morning rush is getting you down, try doing as much preparation as you can the night before. For example, clothes can be laid out, bags can be packed with everything ready for the next day.



Indoor plants can be good for your health.

Seven nutrients to eat for stress relief

The following nutrients can be linked to the stress reactions in the body, and eating or avoiding certain foods can help to moderate those reactions.

POTASSIUM – When stressed, adrenaline levels spike, and potassium levels drop.

Sources: *potato, sweet potato, watermelon, spinach, beetroot, bananas*

TRYPTOPHAN – The sleepy feeling from over-indulging might be linked to the tryptophan found in food. Tryptophan is an amino acid that is converted in the body to serotonin, which regulates mood, appetite, and sleep.

Sources: *porridge, dates, eggs, fish, poultry, tofu, nuts, dark chocolate*

B-GROUP VITAMINS – B-group vitamins support the production of mood regulators. Serotonin and melatonin help control blood sugar, produce energy, and support the digestive system. A study by Swinburne University in Melbourne found that participants taking a vitamin B-complex supplement reported a 20% reduction in work-related stress.

Sources: *beef, spinach, asparagus, avocado, dried beans, peas, lentils, nuts, vegemite*

OMEGA-3 FATTY ACIDS – Omega-3 can help regulate the body's levels of cortisol, a hormone that is released during times of stress.

Sources: *oily fish, such as salmon and sardines, also krill oil, flax seeds, nuts, grass-fed beef*

VITAMIN C – A nutrient known to help regulate cortisol levels.

Sources: *citrus fruits, blueberries, cranberries, kiwifruit, pineapple*

MAGNESIUM – Magnesium aids muscle relaxation and regulates the nervous system. Lack of magnesium can amplify the stress response.

Sources: *green leafy vegetables, whole grains, beans, nuts and seeds*

PROBIOTICS – As well as helping to regulate cortisol, probiotics stimulate healthy gut bacteria. Studies show that there may be a link between changes to gut bacteria and anxiety levels.

Sources: *low-fat yoghurt and fermented foods*

Eating
for self-care



Avocados – a great source of B-group vitamins.





Five benefits of walking

Walking has health benefits beyond improving your physical fitness.

Walking can help to lower your stress levels and improve your sense of wellbeing. A 2017 study published in the General Hospital Psychiatry journal found that 80% of those receiving treatment for depression believed exercise improved their mood.

1. It helps shift your mind into a more peaceful state, by triggering a state called 'involuntary attention'.
2. If outside – it brings you back to nature, which can improve memory and attention span, while reducing stress.
3. It boosts endorphins, which reduce stress hormones.
4. It boosts energy – reducing fatigue can also reduce stress levels.
5. It can be a pleasurable way of spending time with others.

Exercising
for self-care





The science behind hobbies improving mental health

From an article by Ciara McCabe – Assoc. Prof., Neuroscience, University of Reading

The pandemic took its toll on peoples' mental health. The World Health Organization (WHO) guidance on how people can look after mental health includes trying to keep a regular pattern of eating, sleeping, hygiene and exercise, and finding time to do enjoyable things.

Having a hobby is linked to lower levels of depression. In fact, losing interest in things you normally like doing is known as *anhedonia*; this is a common symptom of depression and is something patients say they would most like relieved.

Therefore, finding time for your interests and pleasures – such as a hobby – could be one way of avoiding depression. Antidepressants can be less effective in those with mild depression. 'Social prescribing' is a treatment method where doctors ask patients with mild to moderate depression to take up a non-medical intervention (such as a hobby) to improve their mental health.

The reason hobbies work has to do with how they affect the reward system in the brain. When we take part in a hobby that we enjoy, chemical messengers in the brain (known as neurotransmitters) are released – such as dopamine, a chemical which helps us feel pleasure. These feel-good chemicals can then make us want to do the hobby again, and feel more motivated to do so.

So even though we may not feel motivated in the beginning to spend time on a hobby, once we start it and feel the associated pleasure, this will kick-start our reward system and subsequently our motivation to do it again.

Alongside pleasure and motivation, hobbies can even improve your brain function. Some hobbies – like playing a musical instrument – can improve your memory, while artistic hobbies (such as reading or board games puzzles) are reported to prevent dementia later in life.

So, if you're feeling lower than normal, perhaps try to find time to re-engage with some hobbies.

Hobbies
for self-care



Four breathing exercises

Relaxing
for self-care



Focusing on breathing helps to soothe the body by kick-starting the 'rest and digest' system and reducing the effects of the 'fight or flight' response. Find out what works for you.

1. The Point of Stillness

Start to notice the journey of each breath, moving in and out of your body. See if you can follow this journey for a while. When it feels right, begin to focus on the pause at the end of each exhale (before the next inhale begins). There is no need to alter the length of this pause – it may be very short, or it may be a little longer. This pause is called the point of stillness, a small space of quiet and rest.

2. Deep Breathing

Place one hand on your stomach and one hand on your chest. Feel the movements as each breath inflates and deflates. Deepen your breaths to maximise the oxygen intake and help facilitate the parasympathetic nervous system (your body's 'rest and digest' mechanism that counteracts the 'fight or flight' response). This is a particularly powerful stress release.

3. Oceanic Breathing

The aim is to create an ocean sound in the back of your throat. Gently place your tongue on the roof of your mouth to slightly narrow your throat, but be careful not to tense up too much! You should still feel comfortable and relaxed. Begin to take deeper breaths and notice the ocean sound being created by your breathing.

4. Elliptical Breathing

This exercise involves two steps. The first is to picture a circular shape in your mind and as you exhale, visualise your breath moving down one side of the circle. As you inhale, imagine your breath moving up the other side of the circle. Once this feels comfortable, begin incorporating the second step by smoothing out your breath so there aren't any noticeable pauses in the breath cycle; as soon as one breath finishes, the next one begins.

HOW TO END THE BREATHING TECHNIQUE – Let your attention move away from your breath by slowly notice the world around you. Slowly open your eyes and reconnect.



Twenty quick pick-me-up ideas

If time is of the essence, consider including quick-fix activities in your self-care plan

- | | |
|---|----------------------------------|
| 1. Brush your hair | 11. Put on a face mask |
| 2. Make yourself a warm drink | 12. Go for a walk |
| 3. Light a candle | 13. Make a smoothie |
| 4. Listen to an upbeat song | 14. Stretch |
| 5. Drink a glass of water | 15. Have a cat nap |
| 6. Give yourself a foot massage | 16. Call someone you love |
| 7. Step outside in the fresh air | 17. Do a short meditation |
| 8. Text someone you love | 18. Spend time in nature |
| 9. Do five minutes of focused breathing | 19. Journalling |
| 10. Buy yourself some flowers | 20. Soak in a bubble bath/shower |

Twelve slower pick-me-up ideas

If more time is available, consider including some of these activities in your plan

- | | |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1. Binge watch a funny show | 7. Spend time with friends |
| 2. Get a massage | 8. Do an intense workout |
| 3. Listen to podcasts | 9. Read a book |
| 4. Organise your wardrobe | 10. Go on a hike |
| 5. Paint a picture | 11. Try yoga |
| 6. Cook a new meal | 12. Go to the movies |

The KCV self-care planners

- ★ Complete one of the plans on the next pages, listing activities with which you feel comfortable. However, do not miss the sleep strategies and try to include relationship-building and exercise strategies for most days.
- ★ After a few days, complete the review section in your plan.
- ★ Register as a *kinship self-carer*, particularly if you would like some support in completing your plan. Registering will make you eligible to receive prizes from September 2021-2022.



Sleeping for self-care	It is recommended that kinship carers list daily strategies to ensure a good night's sleep.
Connecting for self-care	Crafting and maintaining good relationships may be the single most important strategy towards self-care.
Eating for self-care	The importance of diet cannot be overestimated. Planning a nutritious diet is important.
Exercising for self-care	These are physical activities that you can enjoy by yourself or with others. The easiest one to employ is walking but there should be other forms of exercise included if possible.
Hobbies for self care	These are creative activities to be enjoyed by yourself or with others. There are many activities that would fit here, such as gardening and cooking.
Relaxing for self-care	These are activities that you enjoy by yourself. Examples are reading, listening to music, breathing exercises, crosswords.

Option 1 for a self-care plan

One standard activity has been completed for your consideration. Do not forget to address each area of self-care.

	Connecting with others	Exercise	Healthy Eating	Hobbies	Relaxing
Sunday					
Monday			VEGETABLE ONLY DINNER TONIGHT	WEEDING THE VEGETABLE GARDEN	
Tuesday		WALK OUTSIDE FOR 1 HOUR			
Wednesday	ATTEND SUPPORT GROUP				
Thursday					HAVE A BATH BEFORE BED
Friday					
Saturday					
Strategies for a good night's sleep					
REVIEWING MY PLAN					
Two activities in my plan that worked well			Two activities that need improving		
1			1		
2			2		

Option 2 for a self-care plan

One standard activity has been completed for your consideration. Do not forget to address each area of self-care.

MY STANDARD SELF-CARE ACTIVITIES							
	Sun	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat
<i>WALK FOR 20 MINS</i>							
Strategies for a good night's sleep							
REVIEWING MY PLAN							
Two activities in my plan that worked well				Two activities that need improving			
1				1			
2				2			

The KCV Self-Care Community

KCV is forming a kinship care self-care community. The network will be trialled for 12 months between September 2021 to September 2022.

Joining the KCV self-care community will entitle you to:

- be a part of a friendly network
- gifts
- receive relevant self-care articles
- attend workshops and seminars

Over the years, kinship carers have found that joining a community with other kinship carers is an effective self-care strategy. KCV is offering to create a special community that focuses only on the care of the carers themselves.

This community will rely on personal contact through telephone, email and surface mail, enabling even the most isolated carers to participate. However, some face-to-face workshops are likely to be conducted.

 **Join the KCV self-care community NOW. The first 50 to join will receive a gift voucher.**

Please phone KCV on (03) 9372 2422 to join this community.

Feedback about this magazine



Providing feedback on this magazine will automatically put you in the draw to win one of 100 \$20 vouchers. You may phone KCV to answer the questions listed below about this book. Alternatively, you may complete this page and send it to KCV (address at the bottom of the page).

1. Overall, how would you rate this booklet? Please circle one.

Not very helpful

Helpful

Very helpful

2. How did you find this booklet helpful?

3. Which little tips in this booklet did you find most helpful?

4. Which self-care activities do you enjoy the most?

5. How could this booklet be improved?

6. Name self-care issues about which would you like more information.

Name

Postal Address

Email Telephone #

Kinship Carers Victoria 14 Youlden St, Kensington. 3031

Phone: (03) 9372 2422

Email: director@grandparents.com.au | www.kinshipcarersvictoria.org

Notes

Some self-affirming thoughts to consider ...

'Being positive isn't pretending that everything is good – it's seeing the good in everything.'

'Be gentle with yourself, you are doing the best you can.'

'I will feed my strength with sleep.'

'When you get tired, learn to rest, not quit.'

'Willpower is like a muscle – the more you train it, the stronger it gets.'

My favourite self-affirming thoughts ...



Kinship Carers Victoria
is supported by the Victorian Government.

