

### A Guide for Foster & Kinship Carers

## Why this resource?

Caring for children who have experienced trauma can be deeply meaningful — and deeply exhausting. This resource helps you understand hope as an active practice, not just a feeling. It explores burnout, compassion fatigue, and vicarious growth, while offering realistic, grounded strategies to sustain you, your family, and the child in your care.

## Definitions & Concepts

### Why It Matters

Children who have experienced trauma often carry a deep sense of uncertainty about the future. They may struggle to trust that things can improve or that they are worthy of good things.

When carers actively model hope, they offer something profoundly regulating: belief, stability, and the message that change is possible.

*Hope builds resilience.*

*Hope supports identity.*

*Hope strengthens attachment.*

When a child sees an adult remain steady, future-focused, and compassionate — even during hard moments — they internalise that sense of possibility. Hope is not pretending things are fine. It's showing that hard things can be worked through safely.

- **Hope (not just optimism):** Hope is active. It's about setting goals, identifying pathways, and believing you can move toward change — even when things are hard.
- **Vicarious Trauma:** The emotional impact of walking closely with a child's trauma story over time.
- **Vicarious Growth:** The strength, wisdom, and deeper connection that can emerge from caring through adversity.
- **Burnout and Compassion Fatigue:** Emotional exhaustion that comes from giving constantly without enough replenishment or support.

### Role Modelling Hope

- Speak about the future in small, concrete ways
- Highlight effort, not just the outcome
- Model problem solving out loud
- Stay calm during hard moments
- Hold hope when a child cannot
- Share stories of growth and positive change
- Protect your own hope



# Holding on to Hope in Practice

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## Hope in Practice

Hope is not “it will be fine.” It is choosing to believe that change is possible and taking small steps toward it.

Children need adults who believe in their future. When you model hope — even in tiny ways — you communicate safety, possibility, and belief in healing.

### Tips:

- Set one small, achievable goal each week — for you or the child.
- Break big challenges into manageable steps.
- Use future-focused language: “We’re working towards...”
- Notice and name progress, even if it’s small.
- Remind yourself: change happens through consistency, not perfection.
- When things feel stuck, ask: What is one thing still within my control?

## Emotional Exhaustion

Feeling depleted, irritable, numb or disconnected does not mean you are failing. It often means you have cared deeply for a long time without enough support. “You can’t walk through water without getting wet.”

Acknowledging emotional impact is the first step toward sustainable care.

### Tips:

- Notice early signs: irritability, sleep changes, feeling numb or overwhelmed.
- Name it out loud — to yourself or someone safe.
- Schedule regular check-ins with your practitioner before crisis hits.
- Reduce non-essential demands during heavy periods.
- Build in short decompression rituals after hard days (a walk, shower, quiet tea).
- Remind yourself: exhaustion signals the need for support, not self-criticism.

## Real Life Self Care

Self-care is not always massages and weekends away. For many carers — especially solo carers — it’s practical and collective. It might mean saying no, asking for help, setting routines, taking ten quiet minutes, or asking someone to sit with your child while you rest. Small moments matter.

### Tips:

- Protect 10 minutes a day just for you — no multitasking.
- Say no to one extra commitment this month.
- Create predictable household routines to reduce daily stress.
- Ask for practical help (meals, school pick-up swaps, short respite).
- Go to bed earlier rather than “pushing through.”
- Think in domains: physical, emotional, social, spiritual — what feels most depleted?

## Growth Happens alongside Hardship

Many carers report becoming stronger, more reflective, and more connected through this journey. This is vicarious growth. It doesn’t erase the hard days — but it reminds you that meaning, resilience, and wisdom can develop alongside challenge. You are not alone. Hope grows in connection.

### Tips:

- Reflect monthly: How have I grown this year?
- Keep a small “wins” list — even tiny moments of connection count.
- Share positive shifts with your practitioner — don’t just report challenges.
- Notice increased patience, empathy, or confidence in yourself.
- Stay connected with other carers — shared stories build perspective.

## Further Reading & Resources

### The Whole-Brain Child (Siegel & Bryson)

Explains nervous system development and emotional regulation in child-friendly language — useful for understanding behaviour and supporting regulation.