



SELF-REFLECTION EXERCISE: **THE CAREGIVER'S BACKPACK**



Breaking Barriers



Making Connections



Building Confidence



INTRODUCTION

This self-reflection exercise uses the metaphor of a backpack to help parents, carers, families and kin of young people experiencing significant distress and crisis reflect on their caregiving journey.

The backpack represents the collection of resources, beliefs, experiences, and burdens a caregiver carries on their journey with their young person.

It's a strengths-based exercise that focuses on making caregiving sustainable and emphasising the importance of your own wellbeing.

This exercise is designed to be used individually, or in a small group of families/parents/carers/kin supporting each other. It is also an exercise that is used in the RiR Resourcing Your Journey workshop.

Purpose

The Caregiver's Backpack exercise aims to help you to:

- Recognise and leverage your existing resources and strengths.
- Identify and address unhelpful burdens, beliefs, and external influences that may be weighing you down.
- Integrate sustainable care practices and overall wellbeing into your caregiving journey.
- Ultimately, help you to support yourself in your caregiving journey, so you can continue to support your young person without depleting yourself.

Values

This exercise is based on the following values. We encourage you to draw on these values as you progress through the reflection exercise.

- Strengths-Based: Identifying and building on your strengths, skills, and resources, rather than solely focusing on problems.
- Supportive: A safe, non-judgmental, and empathic process that recognises the challenges of recognising and prioritising your needs.
- Self-Compassion: Approach your challenges and limitations with kindness and understanding.





This self-reflection exercise

Self-reflection is a process of communicating with yourself internally to gain new perspectives or insights about your experiences, actions and needs.

Some people like to self-reflect through journalling or talking about their experiences with others. It's really up to you to decide what works best.

After the instructions there is a worksheet to help guide you through this exercise, but you can do it in any way that works for you.

Supports

Sometimes self-reflection can be hard, as we have unexpected realisations about painful experiences or unmet needs.

You may want to think about who you can go to for support if this happens for you, or you experience distress – a trusted friend or support person, or phone based support (see links in the resources section).

REFLECTION PROMPTS

What are you already carrying?

Tools and Strengths: What skills, strengths, values, knowledge, or personal qualities do you already possess that help you in your caregiving? (e.g., resilience, patience, love, advocacy skills, a good sense of humour, prior experiences).

Beliefs and Preconceptions: What beliefs do you hold about yourself, your young person, or the situation that are helpful? What beliefs might be unhelpful or create extra weight?

E.g., "I must fix everything", "I'm not doing enough", "My child should be different").

External Influences and Burdens: What expectations, judgments, or beliefs from others (family, friends, professionals, society) are you carrying? Are they adding to your load or supporting you? What feelings like shame, guilt, or fear might be in there?

What to leave behind or repurpose?

Lightening the load: What are you carrying that you no longer need or that isn't serving you on this journey?

E.g., The need to be 'perfect', comparing yourself to others, trying to control every outcome). Even small shifts can make a big difference.



REFLECTION PROMPTS

Prioritising sustainable care and wellbeing

The term 'self-care,' may conjure images of spa days or bubble baths – things that can feel impossible or even indulgent when you're in the midst of a crisis. It can sometimes feel like another item on an already overwhelming to-do list, or even a source of guilt if we're not 'doing it right'.

Instead of seeing 'self-care' as an optional extra, let's think about it as sustainable, effective care, fundamental to your overall wellbeing.

It's about finding what genuinely replenishes you, so you can continue this important journey without completely depleting yourself. As we lighten the load, we also need to make sure we're packing the essential items that will truly support us. For a sustainable caregiving journey, sustainable care and wellbeing aren't luxuries; they are essential items in your backpack.

Collective care – The well

We can't do this alone. The well represents the sorts of structures and communities that care for (or should care for) you. For example, community and government supports and resources that help parents, carers, families and kin to support a child or young person with complex mental health challenges and navigate the obstacles and complexity associated with finding help.

The well is a place where you can stop on the journey – where you can sit down, take off the backpack, and maybe have a drink. There may be other people at the well who are also on a similar journey but taking different paths. Maybe you open your backpacks and offer each other something.

SUMMING UP



By intentionally packing your backpack, you're not just reacting to challenges; you're actively shaping how you move forward, equipped with your strengths and committed to your wellbeing.

Prioritising your own sustainable care and wellbeing helps make you a more effective and resilient caregiver.

You don't need to do this alone.

Check out the [resources section](#) of this website to find support groups, helplines, online resources, or professional services.

Exploring the contents of your backpack

What are you already carrying?

You've embarked on a significant journey – the journey of supporting your young person through distress and crisis.

Just like any journey, you need a backpack to carry what you need along the way. Your backpack represents everything you bring to this journey: your strengths, your beliefs, your experiences, and even the burdens you might be carrying.



Notes:

Tools and Strengths:

What skills, strengths, values, knowledge, or personal qualities do you already have that help you in your caregiving?

Beliefs and Preconceptions:

What beliefs do you hold about yourself, your young person, or the situation that are helpful?

What beliefs might be unhelpful or create extra weight?

External Influences and Burdens: What expectations, judgments, or beliefs from others are you carrying?

Do they add to your load or support you?

What feelings are there?

Repacking for a sustainable journey

Lightening the load: What to leave behind or repurpose

Having looked in your backpack, what do you notice? Are you carrying anything that you no longer need, or that is simply too heavy to carry on this journey?

What might you be able to leave behind, or perhaps re-frame so it's less of a burden?



Remember this isn't about judgment; it's about acknowledging what's serving you and what's not. Sometimes, leaving things behind means accepting what we can't control or letting go of unhelpful expectations, our own or other people's.

Notes:

Repacking for a sustainable journey

Essential items for your journey: Prioritising sustainable care and wellbeing

As we lighten the load, we also need to make sure we're packing the essential items that will truly support us.

For a sustainable caregiving journey, our own care and wellbeing aren't luxuries; they are essential items in your backpack.

What practices for sustainable care and wellbeing (big or small) are already in your backpack, even if they're a bit dusty?

What new ones would you like to add?



Notes: