

# The Family Focus Self Care Booklet

*Looking after you when  
alcohol & other drugs have  
taken over your family*





Eastern Drug & Alcohol Service (EDAS) provides alcohol and other drug (AOD) counselling and support to adults, young people, and families in the Eastern Metropolitan Region of Melbourne.

The EDAS Family Program offers support to families, parents, siblings, carers, friends and significant others of problematic substance users.

The Family Focus Self-Care Booklet was developed to assist families to recognise when their own health and wellbeing might be suffering in the care of their substance-using family member.

The EDAS Family Focus Project is funded by the Department of Health & Ageing.



**Need to talk to someone?**

Contact the EDAS Family

Program

**Ph: 1300 650 705**

**[www.edas.org.au](http://www.edas.org.au)**



## How do I know if I'm stressed?

When alcohol and other drug (AOD) use emerge as an issue in the family, it is common and normal to feel hopeless, stressed and under-resourced. It becomes normal to focus on the substance use, the impact on the family and expend all energy towards sorting out the problem for your family member.

We all try to look after our family as best we can and sometimes that means we forget about our own health and wellbeing. So how do you know if you are stressed and/or suffering a decline in your health and wellbeing?

- Are you constantly worried about your substance-using family member and thinking about other things or has relaxing become a thing of the past?
- Do you find that your nerves are always on edge and you react strongly to even the smallest of things?
- Do you have problems sleeping or find you can't get out of bed?
- While you have been trying to sort out your family member's problems have you let other areas of your life suffer?
- Do you feel isolated from the rest of your family / friends / community?
- Has healthy eating and exercise become a foreign concept?
- Do you find it difficult to concentrate at work or school?
- Have you had more sick days than usual or left your job altogether or deferred study?
- Do you feel to blame for your family member's problems; feel you got it wrong or that your efforts aren't 'good enough'?
- Do you feel guilty thinking about your own needs?



If any of these questions sound familiar to you, it might be helpful to take a step back and start considering how you can look after yourself and reclaim your life. Remember that the problem is theirs and they are responsible for their own change.

Your responsibility is to be healthy enough to support them when and where you can. Feeling guilty for considering your own needs is very normal but not necessarily helpful.

Letting go is not easy but if you are healthy and relaxed, you will better support your family member through the tough times.

- ✓ Recognise that your health and wellbeing might be suffering
- ✓ Give yourself permission to acknowledge your fears, feelings, frustrations and how tired you might be
- ✓ Acknowledge whether or not you are ready to make changes. Change takes time and only happens when you are ready, willing and able
- ✓ Ask for help – it's a sign of strength and insight, not a weakness



Take a step back and start considering how you can look after yourself and reclaim your life

## What is self-care?

Self-care means exactly that – caring for you and staying healthy. Self-care can strengthen your resilience and prevent ‘compassion burnout’. It is not only about making healthy lifestyle choices it also includes having reasonable boundaries, being aware of your own needs, and staying true to your values. Self-neglect takes a toll on your health, relationships, and your effectiveness.

What you choose as your self-care is personal – there is no ‘one size fits all’ to your choices. Take some time to remember that you know yourself and therefore what might be best for you. Self-care does not need to be active, it can be as simple as taking some time to sit still.

You may not be able to change your family member but you can change your response.

Remember that as a family, you are the experts in your own situation and can explore solutions that work for you.

- ✓ Separate the drug issue from the person
- ✓ Prioritise time for yourself – me time
- ✓ Process emotions – don’t bottle them up
- ✓ Try to maintain healthy social contacts
- ✓ Watch out for changes in your own substance use



Self-care can strengthen  
your resilience

## What self-care is not

Self-care is not about forcing yourself to do something unpleasant or unmeaningful to you. If you feel resistant to your self-care plan, it might not be the right one. If you feel reluctant, check in with your feelings and readiness for change.

How do you know if it is not self-care?

- If it feels like a chore or obligation
- If you hear yourself saying "I should"
- If it feels too much like a boring routine
- If you spend your time doing something nice for someone else. Yes, it makes you feel good, but it is not self-care
- Remember, one person's self-care is another person's poison

A few thoughts on trying too hard: it can feel overwhelming to take on a whole 'health and wellbeing fitness plan' and can become a nightmare or pressure to tick off everything on your to-do-list. Self-care does not have to mean a complete overhaul; the smallest of changes can make a big difference.

- ✘ Don't set unrealistic goals for yourself
- ✘ Don't do activities you don't enjoy or aren't interested in just because 'experts' tell you those activities are the 'good ones'
- ✘ Don't change all areas of your life at the same time. Pick one area and then pick one small change
- ✘ Don't worry about getting it wrong – take every obstacle as a learning opportunity of what might work best for you



The smallest of changes  
can make the biggest  
difference

## The 3 Fs – Feelings, Fears, Frustrations

All families experience problems from time to time. Regardless of the issue, the 3Fs will emerge. Experiencing the 3Fs is difficult but normal.

### Feelings:

There is no right or wrong way to feel about this difficult and often heart-breaking situation.

Common feelings families experience around substance use issues include: anger, sadness, despair, worry, guilt and embarrassment.

### Fears:

What are my fears/worries?

Normal fears families may have include:

- whether their family member will recover from their substance use or addiction
- ability to cope with the situation
- what might happen if the substance user is left alone
- what are the risks of mental illness

### Frustrations:

What are my frustrations?

Normal frustrations families experience focus on the lack of change:

- Why won't they stop using?
- Why won't they change?
- Why does this keep happening?



It is helpful to remember that our responses to problems will depend on our life experience, substance use experience, cultural, religious and societal values, education and knowledge.

## The Anxiety Fs: Fight / Flight / Freeze

In a stressful situation, the body automatically gets the adrenaline pumping ready for the 'flight, fight or freeze' response. This is an important function as it readies us to respond to the situation in a way that instinctively suits us best.

The 'flight' response is usually characterised by:

- Ignoring the situation
- Avoiding the issue
- Denying the issue exists

The 'fight' response is when families move into 'action-mode' or 'damage control'. The danger here is taking on too much responsibility or becoming isolated, exhausted and 'burnt-out'.

An interesting phenomenon is when families experience substance-use related stress, the most common response is to freeze. That is, families can feel powerless to respond in any way whatsoever; or just stop using their negotiating skills altogether.

The good news is that families have skills and strengths that are used in stressful situations of any nature. These same skills and strengths can also be used for substance related stressors.

- Use the negotiating skills you already have
- Use your every day decision making skills
- Use your planning and goal making skills



### A few points to remember:

- ✓ It's not your fault
- ✓ Most users do recover
- ✓ Don't let the word 'drugs' scare you
- ✓ Asking for help is a strength
- ✓ There is help available

## How do I address my own needs and incorporate the idea of self-care?

If you are having trouble thinking of self-care things to do, the following might be occurring:

- Feeling guilty for refocussing attention on yourself rather than your substance-using family member. Remember that looking after yourself is an important aspect of caring for your family.
- Your ideas might not fit your lifestyle, your personal interests, or your budget. Self-care does not have to cost anything, be too challenging or life-changing.
- Are you trying to be too structured or not structured enough?

When developing your self-care plan or activity, it can be helpful to remember how you played as a child.

For example, did you enjoy being a superhero or playing dress-up? If so, your self-care might be making a small change to your wardrobe:

- ✓ Loosen your tie or better still, take it off
- ✓ Try a new colour
- ✓ Dress up or maybe dress down!
- ✓ Take off your shoes and give your feet a stretch



Did you enjoy story books as a child? If so, your self-care might be something literary:

- 📖 Read a newspaper or magazine
- 📖 Escape into the latest novel / biography for a while
- 📖 Browse around a bookstore

Did you enjoy singing, dancing or playing air-guitar as a child? If so, perhaps listening to music will be your self-care activity:

- 🎵 Put on your favourite CD in the car when you go out
- 🎵 Have some background music playing while doing housework, gardening, tinkering in the shed
- 🎵 Does your alarm clock wake you up to talk-back radio? Why not tune it to some music?
- 🎵 Sing in the shower!

Did you enjoy daydreaming and seeing shapes in clouds as a child? If so, sounds like your self-care might be a little time out:

- 🕒 Find a quiet place to sit for a moment
- 🕒 Literally go out and smell the roses
- 🕒 Check the weather by going outside rather than looking at the weather channel or your phone 'app'



## Take some time out

Time out can feel impossible when we have hectic and stressful lives and feel we must be constantly problem-solving our family issues.

Taking time out for self-care can be as simple as giving you 5 minutes of breathing space right up to a day off or a holiday away.

If you are always busy notice for example whether you ever sit to have a cuppa or do you quick sip on the go.



What is this life if, full of care,  
We have no time to stand and stare?

No time to stand beneath the boughs,  
And stare as long as sheep and cows

No time to see, when woods we pass,  
Where squirrels hide their nuts in grass

No time to see, in broad daylight,  
Streams full of stars, like skies at night

No time to turn at Beauty's glance,  
And watch her feet, how they can dance

No time to wait till her mouth can  
Enrich that smile her eyes began?

A poor life this if, full of care,  
We have no time to stand and stare.

*Leisure by W. H. Davies*

## Keep it simple

### Relaxation tips

Relaxation can take many forms and can definitely be a challenge when our lives feel overwhelmed with family issues, substance abuse and mental health worries. Self-care is about making relaxation an attainable exercise. Here are some simple tips:

### Guided imagery exercise

Close your eyes or look at the floor and try to picture a place, an object, any image that makes you feel good. It could be imagining a sunny day, or your favourite painting, or your team kicking a goal, or eating an ice cream. Hold that image in your mind so that you can remember it. Now any time you feel stressed or need time out picture that image.

### Breathing exercises

No need to be yoga-master for these easy breathing exercises. Pick one and give it a try:

1. Simply blow out all the air in your lungs as if blowing out candles, then take a deep breath and blow that out gently
2. Take a breath in through your nose, hold for 3 seconds and blow out through your mouth. Repeat 3 times.
3. Try to yawn with your mouth open as wide as possible



### Easy muscle relaxation tips

1. Squeeze your hands into fists as tight as you can then let go and open your palms flat
2. Shrug your shoulders up to your ears. Hold tightly for 5 seconds then let go. Repeat 3 times then roll your shoulders a few times
3. Close your eyes and squish up your face tightly. Hold for 5 seconds then relax noticing your eyelids flutter, your cheeks soften and unclench your teeth to relax your jaw

## General things to do

Self-care activities will only be helpful if you choose ones that have some interest or meaning to you. Trying too hard or choosing something that doesn't suit you will only create more stress and fatigue.

Self-care does not have to be expensive to be effective; nor does it have to take hours of your time – unless that is what you choose of course! Here are a few ideas to get you started:

- ✓ Take a breath and a moment to calm down
- ✓ Have a calming cuppa and maybe read the paper
- ✓ Have some down time- watch some TV, read a book, surf the internet
- ✓ Catch up with your mates / phone a friend
- ✓ Have a bath, or if that's too much what about using pampering soap in the shower
- ✓ Try for the next level on your favourite video game
- ✓ Go for a walk – even 5 minutes outside walking around your garden if you have one is better than no walk at all!
- ✓ Buy yourself a bunch of flowers



One size does not fit all.  
Find something YOU like  
to do.

## EDAS Suite of Family Services

The EDAS Family Program offers support to families, parents, siblings, extended family members, carers, friends and significant others of problematic substance users through the following programs.

To make a referral to any of our services, call the EDAS Intake Line  
**Ph: 1300 650 705**

### Family Counselling Program

EDAS Family Counselling Program offers support for families, siblings, parents, carers, children and friends of substance users.

The Family Counselling Program provides the opportunity to:

- ✓ explore family concerns about the substance user
- ✓ develop strategies for effective support
- ✓ explore the impact of substance use on mental health
- ✓ explore strategies for self-care

The Family Counselling Program is offered as:

- Individual, couples and family therapy
- Single session, brief or longer term support
- Outreach and after-hours service available

### Family Support Group

The Family Support Group runs monthly at our EDAS sites. It is a peer support group lead by a trained facilitator who has also experienced family substance-use issues

- ✓ Family Worker is on site for support as required
- ✓ Discussions about current family issues; education and guest speakers

### First Response Forums

First Response is a 120 minute discussion / education session for families with an emerging substance-use issue or just wanting accurate information. First Response is not therapy, but rather a brief intervention that offers the opportunity to talk about your issues, ask questions, learn new information and receive a take-home resource pack.

- ✓ Information about alcohol & other drugs
- ✓ Discussion about the dual impact of substance on mental health
- ✓ Referral pathways and navigating the service system
- ✓ Offer of single session counselling as follow up
- ✓ Rotates monthly around the 3 EDAS sites



## Useful Books

### A Million Little Pieces

**James Frey**

When he entered a residential treatment centre at the age of twenty-three, James Frey had destroyed his body and his mind almost beyond repair. He faced a stark choice: accept that he wasn't going to see twenty-four or step into the fallout of his smoking wreck of a life and take drastic action. This semi-fictional memoir is an uncommon account of a life destroyed and a life reconstructed.

### Candy: A Novel of Love and Addiction

**Luke Davies**

In this novel the unnamed narrator falls in love with Candy, who gravitates to his bohemian lifestyle... and his love of heroin. Hooked as much on one another as they are on the drug, their relationship alternates between states of oblivion, self-destruction, and despair.

### Don't Let Her See Me Cry: A Mother's Story

**Helen Barnacle**

How do you make a decision about when it's best to let go of your child? Is there a mother out there who could give me any advice? I doubt it. Having Ali taught me about unconditional love. She gave me the reason to continue living.

### He'll be OK: Growing Gorgeous Boys into Good Men

**Celia Lashlie**

In this honest, no-nonsense and best-selling book, Celia Lashlie reveals what goes on inside the world of boys, and that it is an entirely different world from that of girls. With clarity and insight, she offers parents – especially mothers – practical and reassuring advice on raising their boys to become good, loving, articulate men.

### Teenagers, Alcohol and Drugs

*What your kids really want and need to know about alcohol and drugs*

**Paul Dillon**

A respected front-line campaigner answers the real and most commonly asked questions about alcohol and drugs, and shows how parents can get these important conversations started with their kids.



## Useful Websites

### Strongbonds

[www.strongbonds.jss.org.au](http://www.strongbonds.jss.org.au)

The Strong Bonds website offers useful information to help you support your young person through hard times, so that you can keep making a difference to their health and wellbeing. It also, importantly, offers information to help you feel better and cope with the situation. Some of the useful information available from this website includes:

- ◊ Understanding the problem
- ◊ Handling the situation
- ◊ Understanding the reasons
- ◊ Your feelings
- ◊ Real life stories

### MoodGym

[www.moodgym.anu.edu.au](http://www.moodgym.anu.edu.au)

The MoodGym is an innovative, interactive web program designed to address depression. It consists of five modules, an interactive game, anxiety and depression assessments, downloadable relaxation audio, a workbook and feedback assessment.

### Dr Ian Gawler's Official Website

[www.iangawler.com](http://www.iangawler.com)

Dr Ian Gawler is one of Australia's best known long-term cancer survivors and advocate of a healthy lifestyle. He has authored a number of books that explore ancient wisdoms in our modern times. Ian has played a major role in advancing meditation and self-care techniques to the Western world.

### Self-Compassion – A Healthier Way of Relating to Yourself

[www.self-compassion.org](http://www.self-compassion.org)

This website provides information about self-compassion, what it means, meditations and exercises to increase self-compassion. It also offers suggested reading, a calendar of lectures and workshops, video clips and upcoming events.



## References

Davies, W.H., (1911), *Leisure, from Songs of Joy & Others*, A.C. Fifield

Florent, J. & Lee Smith, C. (2010), *First Response Family Forums*, EDAS Family Focus Project

Gawler, I., (2010), *The Official Dr Ian Gawler Website*, Insight Health Services, [www.iangawler.com](http://www.iangawler.com)

Jesuit Social Services, (2009), *Strongbonds: Building Family Connections Website*, [www.strongbonds.jss.org.au](http://www.strongbonds.jss.org.au)



Need to talk to someone?  
Contact the  
EDAS Family Program  
Ph: 1300 650 705  
[www.edas.org.au](http://www.edas.org.au)

This booklet was created by the EDAS  
Family Focus Project Team:  
Janice Florent, Margaret Goodacre,  
Carolyn Lee-Smith, Deb McGenniskin  
and Wendy Raymant  
June 2011





Ph: 1300 650 705  
[www.edas.org.au](http://www.edas.org.au)