



GETTING THROUGH TOUGH TIMES

## Families standing up to shame and stigma by Using care and compassion

### Before you start ...

There are some important things to know before continuing.

### Voices of lived experience

This fact sheet is part of a series we created with families who have been through tough times to spark hope and share new ideas about how to stand up to shame and stigma.

We hope these resources have something to offer all families, but recognise they are simply a snapshot reflecting the lived experiences of the families who helped us create them – other families will have different experiences and stories.

We also intentionally create resources that reflect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of *knowing, being and doing* with guidance from our National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Consultancy Group and partners.

For more information please see [emergingminds.com.au/working-with-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples](https://emergingminds.com.au/working-with-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples)

### Language notes: 'Parents'

Emerging Minds acknowledges that families come in many forms. In our resources, the term 'parent' encompasses biological, adoptive, foster and kinship carers as well as individuals who have chosen to take up primary or shared responsibility in raising children. Our resources aim to support families and the children in their care. We acknowledge that every child is unique and has different strengths, vulnerabilities and experiences that shape their health and development.

Kindness, care and compassion can make a big difference when we come up against stigma and shame. Being kinder to each other (and a little gentler towards ourselves) creates stepping stones toward connection and dignity and away from the isolation, disconnection and shame that can come from stigma.

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**Shame really takes hold when you're feeling vulnerable and when you don't have a strong sense of security or self to rebuff shame. Compassion helps build that sense of security. If shame was mould, compassion would be the sunlight [that destroys the mould].**

EMI, PARENT LIVING ON NGARRINDJERI COUNTRY

Compassion is different to pity. As we learnt in the [Standing against stigma](#) fact sheet, pity can be an expression of stigma if we feel sympathy for the suffering of another person because we view them as 'less than' and/or powerless to change their own circumstances. Instead, compassion is when we try to understand our own or another's experience with care, respect and generosity. We show compassion when we reach out to connect and respond to challenges – that we or others are up against – whether or not we have experienced or understand what others are going through.

Strangely enough, by being kind to others when you are experiencing shame or stigma you can help yourself too. When we get the chance to see how we have made a difference in the lives of others, it can remind us of our own worth and things we value. When shame and stigma are really big for us, or have been with us for a long time, it can feel too hard to be compassionate towards ourselves. Sometimes it's easier to start by being kind and caring to others, and slowly it can become easier to turn that kindness and caring inwards.

Being compassionate does not mean we have to sign up to volunteer or do something big and grand – small and simple acts can make a difference.



TIA, 8 YEARS OLD

**Before you continue, take a moment to think about ...**



- What is a word that fits best for you to describe what we are talking about: Compassion, care, gentleness, love ... or something else? Perhaps a word from culture, faith or another language?
- When you think of that word, is there a song or an image that comes to mind?
- When was the first time you remember experiencing this?
- What has it made possible in your life?
- What has it made possible in your family's life?

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**Compassion is when we try to understand our own or another's experience with care, respect and generosity. We show compassion when we reach out to connect and respond to challenges – that we or others are up against – whether or not we have experienced or understand what others are going through.**

In the following stories, families share how and why compassion can reduce the impacts of shame and stigma. We hope they spark memories and ideas for you about ways that kindness, care and compassion can make a difference in the lives of your family.

### **Finding compassion for ourselves**

'Sometimes when I am having a hard time mentally and emotionally, or sometimes even physically, I remind myself that I should take the compassion I show others and apply it to myself. Thinking about ways to quieten the negative inner voice, I tell myself that it's OK to have bad days and that I wouldn't be human if I didn't experience a range of emotions.'

'Also, it's unrealistic to be happy all the time, so I give myself permission to feel those emotions, and think about remembering to be kind to myself. I learned this through Dr Russ Harris's book, *The Happiness Trap*. Being able to be compassionate towards myself made such a difference to my life because it allowed me to understand and change my attitude and it gave my family breathing space, as now I usually just take myself off somewhere quiet in the house and just chill out. Everyone is far more relaxed because they don't have to walk on eggshells around me anymore. I learned to be compassionate and empathetic to myself through trying different strategies. If one doesn't work, try something different, but remember that you're a human being and you deserve compassion, especially from yourself.'

'I often will have a flashback to a particular thing that has shame attached to it. I have to actively remind myself to be compassionate for the person I was. But when this happens, I'm often not in the space to have self-compassion. I need to be traveling OK to do that and have a good headspace. So, instead, I might redirect my thinking by naming the thought "shame" and then let it go. Or I might do some grounding strategies, like say out loud or in my head my name, age and address, or literally say, "I'm not going to think about that right now." But these are not good long-term strategies, they are more for the moment. If I'm in a good headspace, I'll bring in compassion. I'll accept the thought or memory and remind myself that I was a different person then, I have done a lot of work on myself and am in a better place. I might remind myself that I wasn't well, I hadn't healed then, and I was just trying to survive. And then I'll think about now, what am I grateful for now – my home that I have made stable, the good relationships I have with my children, the peace that I am able to experience that I couldn't before. This all came out of me going through some really tough things but making it through and coming out the other side.'

'When things have gone wrong or I've felt embarrassed, or the shadow of the past has felt too much, it has helped me to get in touch with myself. To just be in the present and sit with myself, take notice and connect with myself. And to be grateful for what I have, but also grateful for my own agency and power and self-compassion. After a while, I learnt to talk to myself and be my own compassionate friend. If you can connect with yourself, it makes you more confident and able to follow your own path. It makes me more able to reach out, keep relationships and reconnect. It has a spin-off for the other types of connection. And it's freeing. And free!'

*This story and more like it can be found in our fact sheet [Finding connection beyond family, friends and community](#).*

## **Finding compassion for others**

'I used to have a lot of anger and hurt towards my parents for how they treated me as a child with complex needs. As I got older, I was able to see that they were doing the best they could with the knowledge and resources they had. It doesn't make it all better, but the compassion has helped the anger and hurt.'

– KC, young person from a rural area

## **Teaching children compassion**

'I started to teach the kids about recognising the world that they live in is not always an easy one. I started to teach them to be compassionate for others. When we were homeless, I used it as a learning experience for them to lessen the blow on themselves: "We are not the only people that are doing this. There's other families." My kids will reach out to anybody that is on the street now if they can see or recognise homelessness, which they do. They have a little radar; they'll say, "Mum, that person – it's raining and they're trying to get some sleep," and "Can we give them something to make sure that they're warm?" I've taught them that we are housed now – we're safe and secure – but there's still people out there that are dealing with this.'

*This story and more like it can be found in our fact sheet [Talking to children about homelessness](#).*

## **I'm with you, you are not alone**

'When I was in the refuge, this is in this tiny little country town, for a long time we were the only family there. And then, every now and again, other families would come in and go out again. At one stage, there was a woman and a child who came in really late at night and she wasn't from the area, she didn't know anyone. And her child was really sick and crying and crying and crying and crying because she was so sick. I could see the staff, they weren't really helping and they were applying this kind of underhanded system of shame. Like, "Look after your kid, you're not doing your job." She didn't have a good handle on English, so I went to her – we couldn't really have much of a conversation because of her lack of English skills – but I just basically said, "Do you want me to take your baby for a while?" And I pretty much spent most of the night sitting with her, taking turns, holding her baby. That was about communicating through action. This sense of "I'm with you, you're not alone, you're doing OK, you're doing your best and we can do this together."



‘That act helped mitigate this shame that I’m certain she would’ve been feeling like, “I’m a failure as a parent because I can’t stop my child from crying.” That kind of thing. And for me, one of the absolutely true, wonderful things about recovery from trauma is that you get to be the helper, not the receiver. And that’s massive. It transforms your own sense of difficulty and hardship into something really positive. It literally flips the coin. It’s so powerful to be helping instead of receiving because it gives you a sense of pride, it gives you a sense of worthiness, it gives you a sense of self-activation, empowerment. You’re reaching out instead of reaching in.’

### **Showing care with words**

‘I tell my kids that they are wanted, loved, a part of the family, and that they belong in our family. I want them to understand that even when things are hard, they matter to us.’

*This story and more like it can be found in our fact sheet [Connecting and caring for each other in tough times](#).*

### **Reaching out to neighbours**

‘I’m in community housing, so that means I am spread amongst non-community housing. There is a real mix of people. My family landed here hard after leaving DV [domestic violence]. There was a lot of fear in our family.’

‘We have a couple of tricky neighbours, and two in particular spent a lot of time fighting. A friend of mine suggested doing a community BBQ. I decided to do it. I designed flyers and printed them out. I said I would provide food, but people could bring a plate to share, and that it would be alcohol-free. I was going to put the flyers in letterboxes, but I decided to knock on doors. I felt able to do that, but not everyone would feel that way, letterboxes would be just fine. I did my whole street. I had quite a few people say they’d like to come.’

‘When I was organising it, I spoke to my community housing provider and they were super happy and offered to help fund it. They lent me a BBQ and a gazebo and gave me a gift card for the supermarket, so it cost me nothing. My kids weren’t actively involved in it much, but they were there. On the day, I set it up on my front lawn – it was important it wasn’t in my house so we felt safe.’

‘I think one or two people came! If you looked at the numbers you would say it was an absolute flop. But it wasn’t. Lots of people drove past and said they were sorry they couldn’t make it or tooted their horns. Aside from that, there was a ripple effect.’

‘So much of the time we want an immediate outcome, but some things happen slowly, and this was an example of that. Stepping out and welcoming people helped to break down barriers.’

‘Since then, over the past three years, my two warring neighbours, instead of yelling at each other, have been laughing with each other. And for my children who had been in trauma, what the BBQ did was that it normalised our neighbours – it brought them into our sphere of belonging. Instead of our neighbours being separate to us, it brought down barriers and helped my kids feel a part of our neighbourhood. It helped me as well – it took an opening of my heart to my neighbours, and just by doing that it brought down some barriers that I had put up out of fear.’

*This story and more like it can be found in our fact sheet [Feeling connection and belonging outside our families](#).*

### **Try to take care of yourself as a parent (a story of homelessness)**

‘You just have to take one day at a time and stay strong. And most of the time, bad times don’t last forever. And if they last a long time, we still do get through them. I just had to start to really focus on taking care of myself through it. So, making sure I got a walk in and the kids got exercise, being in nature and connecting in with some normality of our lives ... friends. We didn’t have a house to go home to every night, but we did have our friends and we did have people that loved us around us.’

*This story and more like it can be found our [Tips for families experiencing homelessness](#).*

### **Standing in solidarity against stigma experienced by others**

‘During the Australian referendum for a Voice to Parliament, I made a decision to volunteer as much as I could for the Yes vote. I’m not Aboriginal, so I didn’t have the burden of everything that comes with that – having to be the spokesperson and to talk about this stuff, when you’re carrying so much stuff, how hard is that? So I thought, it’s my role now to step up and take that burden as much as I can. A response to shame and stigma, to recognise that the person who is experiencing it, maybe they’ve already responded to it a thousand times that day, or maybe their whole lifetime is a response to it. They shouldn’t have to be the responder all the time. Other people, if you are able to step up, call it out, be the voice. Obviously, check if it’s OK first because you don’t want to take away somebody’s voice, but if that space is there, be that voice.’

## Take a moment to think about ...



- What stood out to you from reading these stories?
- What acts of compassion or care stand out in your family?
- What will you think about or do differently after reading these stories?

To read more about the power of compassion to address shame and stigma, check out the stories in [\*Collaboration and care between families and service providers\*](#).

Next, you might like to explore our fact sheet [\*Families standing up against shame and stigma by making meaning\*](#).

## Recommended resources

The website [raisingchildren.net.au](http://raisingchildren.net.au) has helpful information on being kind to yourself:

- [\*Self-compassion for parents\*](#)
- [\*Self-compassion for children: 3-8 years\*](#)
- [\*Self-compassion: pre-teens and teenagers\*](#)

You might also be interested in trying some of the [\*guided self-compassion practices\*](#) on [self-compassion.org](http://self-compassion.org).

AVAILABLE HERE

View all Shame and stigma resources



Are you a practitioner wanting to share this resource with a person or family?

First, check out our practitioner guide: [emergingminds.com.au/resources/practitioner-guide-shame-and-stigma](http://emergingminds.com.au/resources/practitioner-guide-shame-and-stigma)

## Emerging Minds Families

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