

# Trauma Informed Mindfulness to Support Children in Times of Crisis.

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# Mindfulness for Caregivers

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Children look to the significant adults in their lives for guidance to help them manage their reactions during disasters and traumatic events. In order to best support children at such challenging times it's critical that caregivers remain as calm and grounded as possible.

The best way to support the children in your care is to provide comfort, reassurance and emotional support; and allow the time and space for children to talk or ask questions about the disaster (without forcing them to).

**A calm and steady presence is a powerful source of comfort and reassurance for children.**

It helps them gain a sense of emotional and physical safety which supports them process their reactions.

Of course, it's likely that you're struggling with your own feelings of overwhelm and distress so it's absolutely understandable that it may not be as easy as simply staying calm and grounded when supporting children. It's important to recognise if you are struggling with your own reactions and find ways to take care of yourself. Seek support as needed, personal and/or professional, so that you are in the best possible position to support the children you care for. It's not about being perfect (there's no such thing!) or setting unrealistic standards for yourself that you'll become a 'zen master' overnight. Instead, it's about being kind to yourself and recognising what you need in order to support the children in your care as best you can. Just like in an aeroplane it's about putting your own oxygen mask on first!



SMILING  
MIND



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**Prioritise self-care** – engage with activities that you find soothing and enjoyable, activities that support your mental health and wellbeing (e.g. yoga, walking, swimming, hobbies, listening to music, connecting with friends). Self-care is not selfish – it's quite the opposite as it helps you help others.



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Reach out and ask for **support** from family, friends and/or colleagues.



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Seek support from a **mental health professional** if you need to.



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If you haven't already, consider establishing your own **mindfulness practice**.

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## Mindfulness for Caregivers cont.

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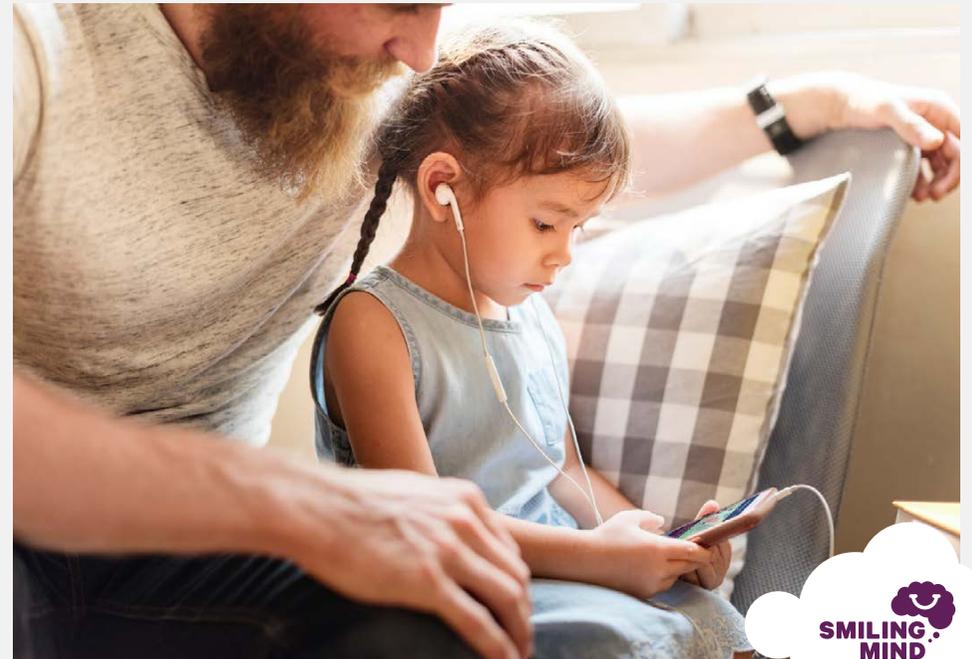
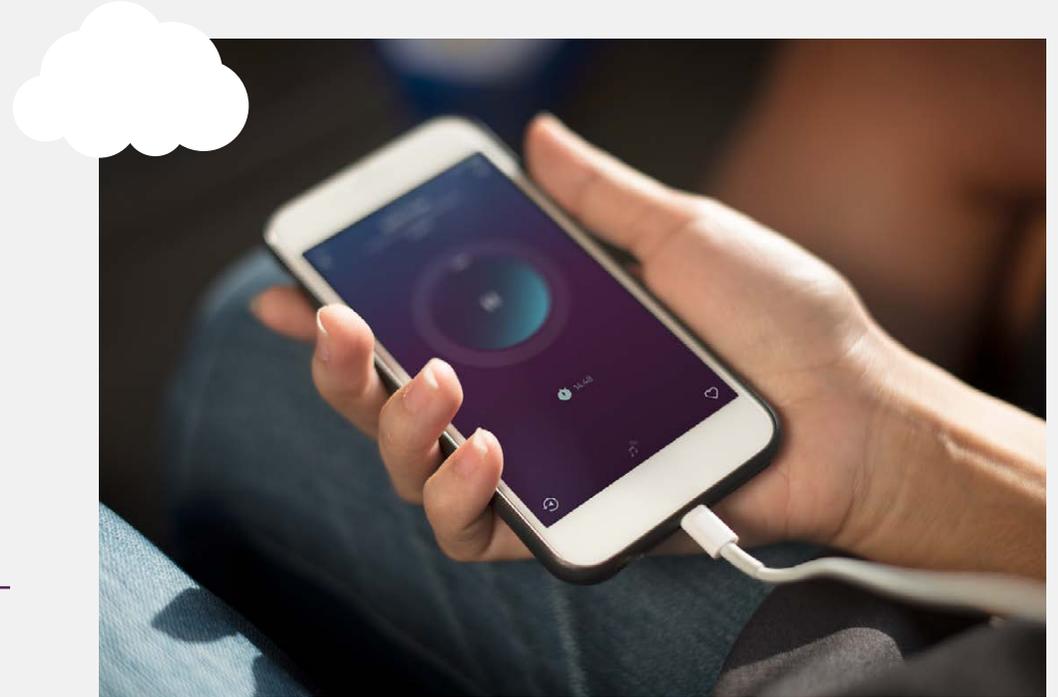
Mindfulness has many benefits, some of which include reduced stress, anxiety and overwhelm; improved sleep and an increased ability to regulate strong emotions. Mindfulness helps you get better at responding, rather than reacting automatically in ways that may not always be so helpful. It increases awareness of your own responses and reactions, as well strengthen your ability to really listen to and be patient and present with others. This in turn helps you provide the children you care for with the emotional support they need, rather than inadvertently pass on your own feelings of stress and anxiety.

### How to get started:

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- 1 Download the Smiling Mind App
  - 2 Check out our most popular Adult Programs – ‘An Intro to Mindfulness’, ‘Mindfulness Foundations’ and/or ‘Stress Management’
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Remember, being mindful doesn't mean being happy all the time, that's impossible. It's important to understand that emotions are normal and, particularly during very challenging or traumatic events, it's very normal to feel a huge range of emotions. Supporting your child to understand that this is normal requires honesty and openness. Try not to hide all your emotions from your child – your modelling of feeling, and taking steps to manage emotion is a good way to teach your child how to manage their own emotions.



# Using Mindfulness Practices to Support Children

Children (and adults) can have a range of reactions in the aftermath of a disaster or traumatic event, whether through direct exposure to the event or indirect exposure through media coverage. These reactions can occur immediately or some weeks, or even months, later, and can lead to 'altered states of arousal'. That is, strong stress responses that result in hyper (over) and/or hypo (under) arousal.

Hyperarousal is when one's stress response becomes more frequently and easily triggered and can result in being on constant alert, experiencing strong emotional reactions, physical symptoms such as nausea, shortness of breath, heart palpitations, loss of bladder and bowel control; as well as aggressive or oppositional behaviours. Hypoarousal on the other hand can result in becoming frozen, physically and emotionally, as a way of disconnecting from overwhelming stress. Children may appear to 'zone out'.

When children become dysregulated, either over or under-aroused, the following strategies can help them return to the place between hyper and hypo-arousal where they feel calm, grounded, present and safe. It is in this place that children can then absorb the comfort and reassurance they need in order to feel safe and supported and process their reactions.



# 1. Mindful Breathing

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Helping children regulate their breathing is one of the fastest ways to deactivate the stress response in the body and activate the relaxation response.

## **Rhythmic Hand Breathing:**

Have children standing or sitting tall. Ask them to turn their right hand so that their palm is facing up to the sky and their right arm is bent at the elbow. Guide them to inhale and raise their right hand upward. Then, ask children to turn their hand so that their palm is now facing the ground and lower it back down as they breathe out. Continue until children are feeling calmer and more relaxed. As you guide children through exercise it is recommended that you demonstrate at the same time so that they can follow your lead.

## **5-Finger Breathing:**

Have children spread one hand out like a star. Then instruct them to use the index finger on their other hand to trace the outline of their 'star hand'. On the inhale move the index finger to the top of the thumb. On the exhale move the index finger down between the thumb and first finger. On the next inhale move to the top of the first finger and on the exhale move down between the first and second finger. Repeat until children have taken five slow, deep breaths (or more if needed for them to feel calmer and more relaxed). As you guide children through exercise it is recommended that you demonstrate at the same time so that they can follow your lead.



## 2.

# Mindful Grounding

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Grounding exercises help calm and centre by bringing awareness back to the present moment through engagement of the senses.

### **Senses:**

Ask children to look around the room and notice and name 3 things they can see.... and pause. Now ask children to listen carefully and notice and name 3 things they can hear... and pause. Then ask children to notice and name 3 things that they can touch.

### **Roots to the Ground:**

Ask children to stand up and plant their feet into the ground.... Ask them to imagine that their feet have roots that go deep, deep, deep into the ground.... Ask children to wiggle their toes, then bend their knees and 'bounce' up and down several times. As you guide children through exercise it is recommended that you demonstrate at the same time so that they can follow your lead.

### **Blowing:**

Ask children to open their right hand with their palm turned upwards and blow a breath on their right palm. Then guide them to turn their hand over and blow on the top of their right hand. Ask children to open their left hand with their palm turned upwards and blow a breath on their left palm. Then guide them to turn their hand over and blow on the top of their left hand. Instruct children to bring their attention to their hands and notice how their breath feels on their hands as they blow, how warm or cool their breath feels. Repeat the sequence 2–3 times. As you guide children through exercise it is recommended that you demonstrate at the same time so that they can follow your lead.



### 3.

## Developing Body Awareness

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Developing body awareness by bringing attention to different parts of the body is another way to help children access a state of balance. The following exercises can be done on their own or as a sequence.

#### **'Side-to-Side' Activity:**

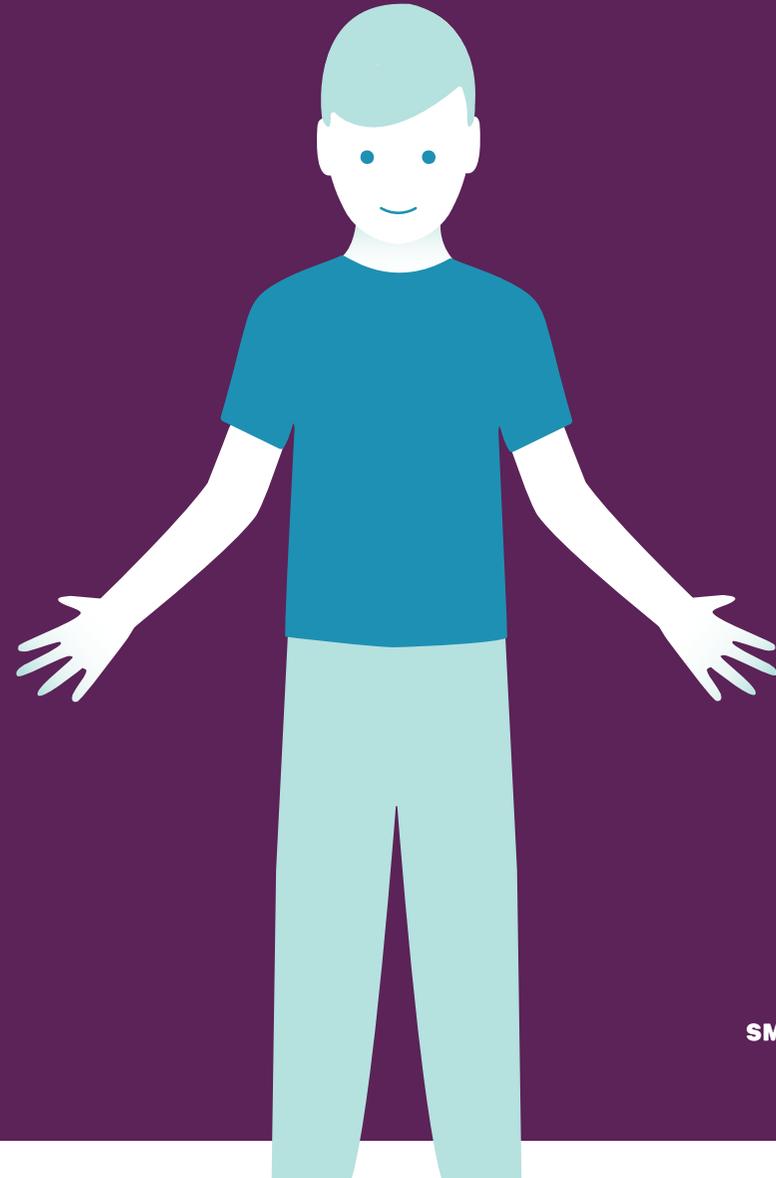
Ask children to stand with their legs shoulder-width apart, arms relaxed by their sides. Guide children to gently move to one side and pause, and then to the other side and pause... and then to find the midway point between left and right sides. Ask children to notice if one side feels better than the other. As you guide children through exercise it is recommended that you demonstrate at the same time so that they can follow your lead.

#### **'Top-to-Bottom' Activity:**

Ask children to gently stretch their arms above their heads and come up on to tip toes and pause. Come back down to centre and pause. Crouch down and touch your feet and pause. Then find the midway point between head and feet. Ask children to notice if it feels better stretching up or crouching down. As you guide children through exercise it is recommended that you demonstrate at the same time so that they can follow your lead.

#### **'Front-to-Back' Activity:**

Ask children to stand with legs shoulder width apart, arms relaxed by their sides. Instruct them to rock gently forward onto the balls of their feet, but not too far so as not to fall over. Pause. Then rock back onto the heels of the feet and pause. Then find midway between their front and back. Ask children to notice if it felt better moving forward or moving backward. As you guide children through exercise it is recommended that you demonstrate at the same time so that they can follow your lead.



# Tips for Trauma Informed Mindfulness Practice



Manage children's expectations – explain what they'll be doing and why before practising together.



Manage your own expectations – different strategies will work differently for different children. It's a process of working out what is most helpful for who. Try to be patient as you explore and experiment.



Teach strategies to children when they're calm so they are familiar with them and can use them when they become over or under aroused.



Always use invitational language when introducing these strategies to children and never force anyone to take part. Let children know that they can stop at any time if they need to.

**Note:** this document has been created for use as a support aid only and does not constitute psychological treatment of any kind. If you have any concerns about your own mental health or that of a child in your care, we recommend seeking professional psychological support.

