



**National
Theatre
home**

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Dixon and Daughters

Self-Care Guide

A production from

National Theatre **CLEAN
BREAK**

What is *Dixon and Daughters*?

Dixon and Daughters is a play about a family of adult women in Bradford who are dealing with allegations of historical child sexual abuse and domestic violence.

Mary has just been released from prison. She wants to come home and forget all about it, but her stepdaughter Briana has other ideas.

Over a tumultuous two days a family is forced to confront not just their past but themselves. Because even if you refuse to hear the truth, the truth doesn't go away.

Age recommended 14+

About this guide

Thank you to **Clean Break** for bringing their care practices, including this Self-Care Guide, to the National Theatre during our co-production of *Dixon and Daughters* (2023). Clean Break is a theatre company working with women with lived experience of the criminal justice system or at risk of entering it.

This guide also takes inspiration from the work of **20 Stories High** and **The Survivors Trust**.

Why self-care?

Dixon and Daughters might be challenging to engage with, especially if you are affected by the content. This guide will help you look after yourself whilst you are watching.

This guide includes:

- 1) Self-care introduction and further resources
- 2) Self-care suggestions
- 3) Helplines and support
- 4) Content warnings
- 5) A synopsis

What does 'self-care' mean?

'The concept of self-care comes from the Black Feminist movement. Self-care is a choice to listen to our needs and look after ourselves, so we are able to keep going and live our best lives, despite the difficulties we experience in life and how they make us feel.' – Clean Break

'Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.' - Audre Lorde, a Black feminist and pioneer of self-care.

Further reading and resources about self-care

London Survivors Gateway self-care guide – this guide has been written for people who have experienced sexual violence, but it includes lots of helpful self-care tips which could be useful for anyone.

Anna Freud Self-Help Hub – this resource hub has been created for young people, but it contains lots of self-help tips and suggestions which anyone could find useful.

Self-care suggestions

Here are some suggestions of self-care that you can do independently. You may prefer to do these before watching the play if you think you are going to find the content challenging, or after watching it.

Breathe

Breathing is a great way to help you feel calm. Try breathing in for four seconds, holding your breath for four seconds, exhaling for four seconds and holding again. Repeat this for as long as you need.

Try a grounding exercise

Grounding exercises are things you can do to bring yourself into contact with the present moment to relieve distress. There are many ways you can do this:

Working backwards, use your five senses to bring yourself calmly back into the room and your body. List things you notice around you. For example:

- 1)** Notice five things you can see, four things you can feel, three things you can hear, two things you can smell and one thing you can taste.
- 2)** Sit with your feet on the floor and back against your chair and either gently tap each leg or cross your arms and tap your shoulders.
- 3)** Wash your hands, have a shower or drink some water.

Listen to the audio grounding exercise on National Theatre at Home that was created for our theatre audience.

Talk to someone

If you find the content of *Dixon and Daughters* distressing, do consider contacting one of the organisations we've listed in this self-care guide, if you've not done so already.

Helplines and support

Agenda

Support and protection for women and girls at risk of abuse, poverty, poor mental health, addiction, homelessness and contact with the criminal justice system.

Weareagenda.org

+44 (0)20 3883 7792

Drinkline

Free, confidential helpline for anyone who is concerned about their drinking, or someone else's.

+44 (0)30 0123 1110

One in Four

Supports people who have survived child sexual abuse.

oneinfour.org.uk

+44 (0)20 8697 2112

Rape Crisis UK

Support for anyone who has experienced rape or sexual violence, no matter when or where it happened.

247sexualabusesupport.org.uk

+44 (0)80 8500 2222

Respect

Help for people who are concerned that they are using abusive behaviours in their relationships, with either current or previous partners.

Respectphoneline.org.uk

+44 (0)80 8802 4040

Samaritans

Provides emotional support to anyone in emotional distress, struggling to cope, or at risk of suicide.

Samaritans.org

+44 (0)84 5790 9090

The Survivors Trust

Provide specialist rape and sexual abuse support services.

thesurvivorstrust.org

Unlock

Provides a voice and support for people who are facing stigma and obstacles because of their criminal record.

Unlock.org.uk

Victim Support

Confidential information and support for people who have been affected by a crime.

Victimsupport.org.uk

+44 (0)80 8168 9111

Women in Prison

Supports women affected by the criminal justice system and campaigns to end the harm caused to women, their families and our communities by imprisonment.

womeninprison.org.uk

+44 (0)20 7359 6674

Before watching *Dixon and Daughters*

Read the summary

If you think the content warnings suggest that you might find the play difficult to watch, read the full synopsis in this guide. This will help you prepare for any difficult bits and decide if the play is right for you.

Consider your space

The play contains some difficult themes relating to domestic space. It may feel helpful to be able to physically 'leave' these topics in another room after it ends. For this reason, some people may prefer not to watch the play in their bedroom. Watch the play wherever feels most comfortable for you.

Prepare a grounding kit

Having tissues, things to squeeze or stroke (like a stressball, pebble, or soft object), or something calming to smell (like a scented candle, incense, or essential oil) can be useful to gather in advance. Sometimes we can be surprised by how something affects us, and it might feel helpful to have grounding tools already to hand.

While you're watching *Dixon and Daughters*

Watch the play with someone else

Ask a friend or someone you trust to watch with you.

Know if you need to step away

There is nothing wrong with deciding this isn't for you or it's too much. Walk away or turn it off, do what feels right for you.

After watching

Find some nature

If you can, try looking out of the window or going for a walk. Experiencing nature can be beneficial to our wellbeing and help us feel grounded.

Listen to some music

It could be calming and gentle or make you want to move your body, whatever makes you feel good.

Journalling

Write down your thoughts and how you're feeling. It could be on some paper or on your phone.

Practice self-compassion













We often show more compassion to other people in our lives than we do to ourselves, which is why it can be helpful to take a moment to be intentional about the kindness we offer ourselves. One way to do this is with an exercise like this one:

Place your hand over your heart or hug yourself and recite:
 May I love and accept myself just as I am
 May I remember to treat myself with love and kindness
 May I be open to my experience just as it is.

Or write your own:
 May I...

Content warnings

In the synopsis below we have used symbols to show when the topics in this content warning list come up, so you can see them at a glance.

Topic	Symbol
Sexual violence / child sexual abuse	
Domestic abuse / coercive control / gender-based violence	
Prison / criminal justice system	
Care system	
References to suicide	
Problematic mother / child relationships	
Addiction / alcohol / mention of drugs	
Bereavement	
Strong language	
Interpersonal violence	
Blood	
Homelessness	

Synopsis

NB: this contains spoilers

The names of the characters in the play are Mary, Bernie, Julie, Ella, Briana and Leigh. Mary is the mother of Bernie and Julie, Briana is their half-sister.

Ella is Bernie's daughter.

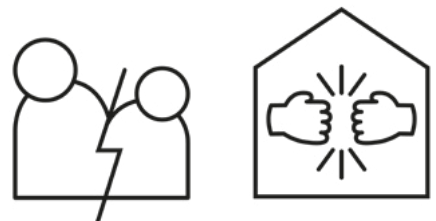
Leigh is Mary's friend from prison.

The setting of the play is in the Dixon family home.

Scene 1



The play begins with Mary returning from prison. Bernie has brought her home and Julie and Ella are waiting to surprise her at the house, they are apprehensive about her arrival. Mary is in a bad mood: she starts complaining about the state of the house, she doesn't seem happy to see anyone and asks if Julie has been staying here.



There is heated discussion between Julie, Bernie and Mary about Julie's living situation. She has been living at Mary's, but now Mary is back, it might not be a good idea for Julie to stay because of the tension between them. Bernie also says Julie can't stay at hers and makes excuses as to why. Mary insensitively asks if Julie's partner has kicked her out again. We learn that Julie is in an abusive relationship and she struggles with drinking.



Mary talks about working in the prison library and how her family did not visit her enough.

Bernie tries to change the subject and then Ella and Mary have a fairly friendly exchange about Ella's university.



Mary starts talking about people vandalising her husband's (Bernie and Julie's father's) gravestone. The daughters haven't visited his grave, Mary says she won't have people thinking she's ashamed and that she will clean it herself.



Julie questions why Mary isn't ashamed and hasn't come to terms with what she did wrong. Mary doubles down, saying she's not the one who lied and 'ruined a man's reputation.' An argument ensues, with Mary saying she is ashamed of Julie, and blaming her imprisonment on Julie for not sticking up for her in court. Mary claims that Julie would be happy if she died.



Mary talks about speaking to the Samaritans, who told her she is still grieving the loss of her husband.

Bernie and Julie start listing things she could do now she's out of prison, Mary doesn't see a point because no-one in the community will speak to her because of the 'lies' Tina told.

Julie tells Mary that Tina has changed her name to Briana and has moved back to the area, and that she's seen her a couple of times. Mary changes the subject. Throughout the play the rest of the family consistently call her Tina, despite Briana and Julie correcting them.



Julie takes her jumper off to reveal bruises on her arms and upper body. Mary doesn't react but Bernie winces and tells Julie to put her top back on so Ella doesn't see.



Mary says if she finds out Briana has been in the house, she will never call Julie her daughter again. Julie is silent, then says that Briana has changed and that Mary should see her. Mary seems upset and angry.

There is a slow fade to black. The front door bursts open and a shaft of light illuminates the house.

Scene 2



Mary is in her room calling Samaritans. She seems apprehensive but is talking about grieving her husband, even though he was 'miserable'. She then hangs up abruptly.

Scene 3

Mary is asleep upstairs. Briana has arrived and is speaking with Julie. They talk about Briana wanting to see Mary. Julie lies and says she has not spoken with Mary about Briana at all. Briana wants to come in and have a nap, Julie is anxious about Mary coming downstairs.



Julie says Paul (her partner) keeps calling her, Briana says she should forget about him.



They talk about Julie being sober for around two weeks, and Briana gets Julie to say empowering mantras about not being a victim. Julie is still anxious about Briana being in the house.



Briana speaks about first disclosing the abuse to her teacher, and being told not to rock the boat or she will be sent back into care.

Briana wants Julie to speak to Mary about her, saying that they needn't be silenced now their dad is dead.

Briana writes her name on the wall of the living room.

Scene 4



Bernie arrives to pick up Mary for her probation meeting and is

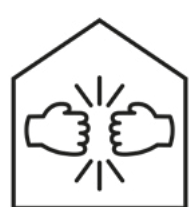
worried they will be late because Julie hasn't helped Mary to get ready.



Julie says Paul has been sending her nice messages and he's going to do an anger management course. Half-joking, Bernie says he should kill himself, and mentions Paul punching someone.

While Bernie is upstairs, Ella tells Julie that she has dropped out of university, she doesn't tell Julie why.

Bernie returns and says Mary is not upstairs. She blames Julie for telling Mary she's seen Briana.



Bernie refers to Paul as 'Fred West' and implies that Julie is a bad mother and daughter. Bernie says that she has to act like the responsible daughter even though she's the youngest. She even had to organise their dad's burial. Julie defends herself.

Mary returns home with her friend Leigh, who seems to have been sleeping rough.



Bernie is worried about Mary's appointment, but Mary is focused on looking after Leigh, who is a friend from prison. Julie says it looks like Leigh is on crack.

Mary says Leigh is going to stay for as long as she likes. Bernie and Julie are suspicious of Leigh.

Leigh starts smoking in the house, and asks if it's obvious she's not wearing any knickers.

Scene 5

Bernie is on the phone, trying to wipe off the word 'Briana' from the wall.

Leigh comes downstairs and says she can't sleep in the spare room, it has a bad energy and is giving her anxiety. She sleeps in Mary's room instead.



Mary talks about Leigh having been kidnapped and abused before, and that she wakes up in the night screaming. Bernie makes light of it and says she might be lying.



Mary talks about being abandoned by her daughters in court and in prison. She mentions being ostracised in prison because her charge was related to crimes against a child, but Leigh stuck up for her. She wishes Leigh was her daughter instead of them.



Bernie asks what Leigh was in prison for, and says she hopes she doesn't find Mary with her 'throat cut'.



Julie has a tense phone conversation with Paul, he uses manipulation tactics to try and get her to come home.

Scene 6

Leigh wakes up in Mary's bed with a loud scream, Briana is sitting on the edge of the bed watching her.



Mary comes in and sees Briana, she shouts for Julie to call the police. Briana says she just wants to talk calmly and she mentions that she has been sober for seven years.



Julie still hasn't called the police, so Mary says is there any sense in her that hasn't been 'knocked out'.



Mary barricades herself and Leigh in the bedroom and says Briana won't 'let it rest'. Briana and Julie are downstairs. Briana mentions being surprised that Mary received a custodial sentence.



It is revealed that Julie has been drinking alcohol. She offers a drink to Briana.



Briana says she just wants Mary to say she believes her – Julie says that will never happen. Briana asks Julie if she would want Mary to believe her too, acknowledge what happened, and apologise for not doing anything. Julie says no and they have a heated exchange. Julie tells Briana to fuck off.



Briana starts moving furniture to reveal a large stain under the sofa, which she says Mary was deliberately covering. Briana says the stain is from when she first spoke up about the abuse, and Ray (their dad) hit her. Julie doesn't seem shocked or affected by this and tells her to cover it again.



Briana speaks more about the damage to the house which is evidence of violence. She mentions Mary perverting the course of justice and lying about what she knows happened. Briana then says that she kept her promise of not telling anyone about what happened to Julie – it's implied that Ray also abused Julie.



Julie pours herself a glass of wine, drinks it quickly and pours another.



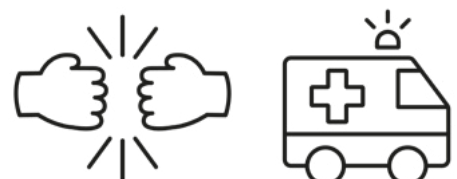
Upstairs, Mary and Leigh are still in Mary's room. Briana goes upstairs and gains access to the room. She says she forgives Mary for lying in a witness statement in 1993 because she was under pressure from Ray. She wants Mary to acknowledge this and apologise.



Mary runs downstairs. Leigh tries to restrain Briana, who breaks free and follows Mary, trying to instigate a conversation. Mary refuses to listen and blames Julie for bringing Briana into her house.



Briana tries to get Julie to tell Mary about Ray abusing her, Julie denies it. Briana says she knows why Mary brought Briana to live with them in 1981.



Leigh runs at Briana with a piece of broken glass from a picture frame. They struggle and Leigh's hand gets cut. Mary pulls Leigh off Briana and Leigh runs out of the house.

Bernie enters and tries to push Briana out the door, but Briana runs upstairs into Mary's room instead. Bernie tries to get her out of the room.



Mary says that Ray never wanted Briana, and talks about going to pick her up from the children's home in the '80s. Mary shouts upstairs to Briana saying that people wrote 'paedo' on Ray's grave because of her. Briana says they wrote it because of what he did to her. Mary pretends not to hear.



Mary tells Julie to find Leigh. Mary also mentions Julie's son, implying that whatever has happened to him is Julie's fault.

Scene 7



Bernie bandages Leigh's hand. There is a lot of blood because the wound isn't closing and the scene is chaotic. Briana says she is a first responder and knows what to do. Leigh is resistant but eventually lets Briana help.



In the kitchen, Bernie pours Julie's wine down the sink.



Briana starts to tell Mary why she thinks she took her from the children's home – it was because she knew Bernie and Julie were in danger of being abused by Ray and Briana was to be the scapegoat. However, it was too late as he had already begun to abuse Julie. Briana says she forgives Mary.



Mary starts being horrible to Julie and makes light of her experience of domestic violence. This upsets Ella.



This drives Julie to the edge. She starts to tell Mary that she knows she saw Ray abusing her. Bernie tries to stop Julie from speaking and sends Ella out of the room.



Mary brings up Julie's drinking again.



Julie tells a story about Mary walking in on Ray abusing her when she was 14, and how Mary did nothing. There is an exchange between Briana and Mary about whether Mary feels guilty – Mary claims she does not.



Eventually, Ella has a revelation, and asks if Ray was Michael's (Julie's son's) dad. Bernie is distraught and denies it, but Julie and Briana are silent.



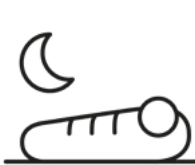
Mary spits in Briana's face. Bernie realises it's true that Ray was Michael's father, and confronts Mary for knowing all along.



Bernie and Ella are in the kitchen while Julie and Mary are in the living room. Mary is still placing blame on Julie, saying she should have kept out of Ray's way and defended herself, like Mary did. Julie stands up for herself, saying she was only a child.



Mary then starts to explain how Ray abused her, through coercive control. Julie goes into the kitchen with Bernie, who says she can come and stay with her, but Julie is considering going back to Paul.



Bernie leaves the kitchen and Ella enters, she tells Julie she saw Michael in Leeds, he is rough sleeping.



Julie finds Mary's bottle of Baileys under the sink and drinks a glass.



Ella helps Mary get into bed and mentions visiting the cemetery. Mary says she doesn't want to visit Ray's grave any more, but she doesn't know who she is if she's not his wife. Ella reminds her that she's a mother and a nana.



Ella goes downstairs and starts crying. She tells Leigh and Briana why she is not at university, which is because one of her tutors is being inappropriate and making advances. Ella feels hopeless because she has little evidence against him, but feels he has power over her.

Briana tries to empower her to make a formal complaint about the tutor. Ella asks her not to tell her mum.

Julie, Bernie and Ella leave. Briana stays sitting on the sofa, working on her laptop and Leigh falls asleep in a chair.

Mary comes downstairs. Briana says she will move the sofa back to cover the stain. Mary says to leave it. She gets a bucket of water and brush and begins to scrub away at the stain.

The play ends.



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