

SELF-CARE FOR PARENTS

Strategies for helping us care for ourselves, so we can care for others for helping us care for ourselves, so we can care for others



2020 has been a crazy year-- completely unlike any that we have experienced before. We are overwhelmed with all sorts of new anxieties and pressures that we never could have imagined. These worries and challenges are amplified for parents that are raising children with mental illness. If you are in this situation, you will face even more challenges and decisions as you navigate these uncertain times. As we try to ride through difficult times in our lives, as parents, we need to also give ourselves permission to take care of ourselves.

Whenever the warm weather hits, I feel called to the water. I love to hike around our Midwestern rivers and lakes-- and at least once each summer, I find myself on a boat. Around here, our lakes and rivers are generally pretty calm, but it can be surprising how fast things can change. This phenomenon reminds me a lot of how this year changed in an instant. This is also how life seems to work. You are just out on the water, living your life, and then all of a sudden something happens that throws you into a rough patch. The COVID-19 pandemic has done that for many, but there can be lots of other life events that can send us into "choppy waters." When we feel enveloped by these rough waters, we may need to rely on our life-preservers to keep us afloat. Self-care is that essential life-preserver that can keep us going.

Caring for Yourself is Caring for Your Family

As parents, we want to give our kids everything that they need. We can feel so much pressure to make sure that we are setting them up for a good life. Kids also frequently need things urgently and for them, many things constitute an emergency. With all of the pressures of parenthood, we can forget to take care



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of ourselves-- we may even feel guilty about it. This guilt is completely unreasonable and unnecessary. ALL PEOPLE ARE WORTHY OF SELF-CARE. When anyone neglects to take care of themselves they put additional stress on their mind and body. The physical and mental effects of stress have been well-documented within the medical and mental health professions.

The stress of not taking care of yourself can result in physical conditions including a weaker immune system and high blood pressure. It can also cause mental health issues including increased instances of depression, anxiety, and anger-management issues.

When we as parents do not take good care of ourselves, it not only affects us, but it will also affect our family and children. Taking care of ourselves is an essential component to taking care of our children. When life throws us into choppy waters, we cannot help our children without putting our own life preservers first. As we are instructed each time that we get on a plane, in case of an emergency we must first secure our oxygen mask, before assisting our children.



When we choose to take care of ourselves, there are also great benefits for our children in two major ways:

- We teach them how to care for themselves by modeling healthy behaviors and strategies.
- We have the patience, mental strength, and physical stamina to effectively parent our children.

Ways Self-Care Teaches Healthy Behaviors

When you demonstrate that you are worthy of self-care and love, they come to understand that they are also worthy of self-care and love.

When you model preventative care your children will also recognize the importance of taking care of themselves.

When kids see you stop when you get frustrated or overwhelmed, they begin to understand that they too can stop when their feelings get to be too much.



Ways that Self-Care Helps Parenting

Self-care allows us to be more patient, calm, and purposeful when we interact with our children.

We are better listeners when we are relaxed, well-rested, and well-fed.

Regular self-care keeps us healthy, which reduces the stressors on our children and family.

When we take care of ourselves, our minds are more clear and are better able to handle challenges that that come up.



Strategies for Practicing Self-Care

If self-care was as simple as putting on a live preserver, we would all be doing it. Unfortunately, self-care takes time and purpose. The ways in which you practice self-care will look different than the ways that other people practice self-care. These practices will also likely change over time with different strategies to meet your needs at different times. We are all different and will need different things. Check-in with yourself. What am I feeling? What makes me feel happy and re-energized? What do I need? Who can help me? We have put together some self-care ideas that you can get started with today. You may already be doing them, but by purposely prioritizing them, (building a self-care routine) you may be able to amplify their positive effects.

Caring for Your Body

- Eat regularly in healthy ways.
- Add more fresh fruits and veggies to the meals you already make.
- Make time for movement- even 10 minutes can have a positive impact.
- Take time for your own medical appointments- routine, preventative care will help you to stay healthy.
- Make sure to get enough sleep.
- Take time to unplug- give your brain time to rest and recharge.
- Spend time outdoors- the fresh air and natural light are natural mood-boosters.
- Stay hydrated; drink more water

Caring for Your Emotional and Social Needs

- Spend time with friends and family (in-person, at a distance, or virtually.)
- Stay in touch with other people in your life through direct messaging or phone calls.
- Express your emotions, allow yourself to feel- It is ok to cry, it is ok to feel joy and happiness even in tough times.
- Reading; stimulate and challenge your brain.
- Work on bringing positivity and communication to your marriage or important relationships.
- Find a way to pamper yourself: get a massage, go to a spa, go fishing, get a haircut (Do things that show yourself that you are important.)
- Reduce stress by planning ahead, asking for help, prioritizing tasks, cutting out extras.
- Set and maintain healthy boundaries; Say no to extra responsibilities.
- Seek outside, professional help if needed.

Caring for Your Spiritual and Creative Sides

- Give yourself quiet time for reflection.
- Write in a journal or doodle.
- Attend worship service in person or online.
- Spend time in nature.
- Try a hobby or try something new.
- Set a goal to learn a new skill and set aside time to work on it.
- Daily devotions, meditations, breathing techniques or reflections.



Additional Supports for Parents of Children With Mental Illness

When you are a parent of a child with mental illness, you may find that you need additional supports to care for yourself.

Education About Mental Illness:

Education about mental illness will give you strength as a caregiver. The more that you can learn about the things that your child is experiencing, the more able that you will be to help them with empathy and compassion.

Community Support:

Support for parents of children is vital. It can often feel like you are alone in the challenges that you are facing, but there are others with similar circumstances to help support you. The support that you receive from other parents with are raising children with mental illness is invaluable. Support from other parents provides great comfort and wisdom. Helpful resources can be found through the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI.org,) Al-Anon Family (Al-Anon.org,) or through your local healthcare or mental healthcare providers. Additionally, many online support groups can be found on Facebook or other social media outlets.

Respite:

Parenting a child with mental illness or special needs without respite can be exhausting. Respite is any type of break that allows temporary relief from the stress of caregiving. This can be taking a moment to yourself for a quiet cup of coffee, taking a walk alone or with friends, exercise, visiting friends, working on a hobby or even arranging appropriate childcare for an evening away.

Professional Help

It is also okay to ask for help. Sometimes we need the outside perspective that professional mental health care can provide. Clergy, counselors, and therapists can all be helpful resources for parents dealing with the unique challenges they face.



Building Self-Care Routines

It is easy for someone to type up a list of all of the things that we should be doing to care for ourselves, but putting these practices into action in our busy lives is another story. We know that we need to take care of ourselves, but where are we going to find the time for all of this self-care? The good news is that self-care doesn't have to take a lot of time- it can just be a few minutes here and there.

We can begin to find this time for ourselves by adapting our idea of what self-care looks like, setting our priorities, and planning for it.

First, we need to adapt our idea of what self-care can look like and how long it takes. Self-care is simply any action or behavior that helps you to feel good mentally and physically. It doesn't have to take long- some things take almost no time at all like filling a water bottle before work, finding a cheery playlist to put on while you cook, or focusing on saying "no" to extra commitments. Other things can take just five to ten minutes. These can include taking a quick walk or stretching, texting a friend, making a cup of tea, or sneaking away for five minutes for peace and quiet. Anything we do that helps us care for ourselves counts.

Next, we can prioritize one or two self-care activities to incorporate into our lives. You don't have to do everything, any time that you set aside for some purposeful time for yourself can have a positive impact. By focusing on just one or two things that are important to you, you will be more likely to make time for your self-care. Trying to change too many things at once can result in feeling overwhelmed or unsuccessful. The goal is to feel better. What are one or two things that you can do to take care of yourself? Write these down and tell others about your self-care priorities.

Once you have adapted your idea of what self-care looks like and decided on what self-care activities to prioritize, then make a plan for building these activities into your regular routine. One way to make sure that you are remembering to take care of yourself is to pair your new self-care habit with something that you already do. Perhaps you take a walk before doing the dishes or you take five minutes alone in your car before you pull out of the parking lot at work. You can also put it on your calendar and tell your family that you will be busy at that time. Having a cheerleader to keep us motivated can help- enlist a friend or family member to check in with regularly. Another helpful hint is to create a playlist ahead of time. These playlists can be the music or podcasts you listen to as you walk or relax or they can be workout videos or meditation tracks, whatever helps you stay motivated to care for yourself.

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BUILDING SELF CARE ROUTINES





PAIR SELF-CARE ACTIVITIES WITH TASKS THAT YOU ALREADY DO:

Take a walk after dinner, before you do the dishes

Enjoy five minutes of peace and quiet before you get out of your car

THE SMALL THINGS MATTER

Just 5-10 minutes of movement can improve your mood and outlook

Only 5-10 minutes of quiet time can be enough for you to recharge.





SCHEDULE IT & FIND A CHEERLEADER

Put your self-care activities on the calendar and let your family know that you will be busy.

Find a friend, co-worker, or family member to check in with that will hold you accountable

SET UP SELF-CARE PLAYLISTS

Setting up playlists can help motivate you to take the time, but also helps you to get to it when time comes.

These playlists may include: music, meditation tracks, podcasts, watch-lists, workout videos, or anything else that helps!



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**You do not have to be perfect.
You do not need to over-extend
yourself to add in self-care practices.
It is just important for you to take
time for yourself- you deserve it.
Self-care not only benefits you but
also those around you.**

It can be so easy for us to get so caught up in all of our responsibilities, worries, and the business of parenting that we forget that we need care too. Our kids have a knack for making their needs seem so urgent that we can feel that we are dealing with one emergency after another. In these times it is important to remember that even in times of an emergency, we are instructed to take care of ourselves first before we take care of others. We need to make sure that our self-care life-preservers are firmly secured to keep ourselves and family afloat in the choppy waters of life.