

MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Self-care for parents and carers

from the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families

Why self-care?

For many parents and carers, finding time for yourself can be a challenge as you juggle family and relationships with your home and work life. This can be especially true if you are supporting a child or young person with their mental health.

With the practicalities of day-to-day life, it can be easy to forget to look after your own wellbeing needs, as well as those of your children, which can lead to feelings of stress or being overwhelmed. Factoring in regular time or activities for yourself will hopefully allow you to enjoy the good moments in life more and to find strength during difficult times.

The following advice about the importance of self-care has been created with the Centre's Parent Champions.

Being kind to yourself

With everything that is going on at the moment, there is a pretty good chance you may be finding things challenging. It may be that you also feel bad about yourself and feel as if you're failing. If this is happening it can help to have a think about how you 'talk' to yourself. We're sometimes much harder on ourselves in our own thoughts than we would be to anyone else we speak to. Imagine that it's a friend who's in your situation right now instead of you. How would you comfort them? How would you encourage them? Can you speak encouragingly to yourself too?

'When things aren't going well, I often blame myself. I'm learning to notice when I do it and to try to be kind and gentle with myself. I tell myself I'm doing my best instead of that I'm failing.'

Give yourself permission

It is very easy, as a parent or carer, to prioritise the needs of your family and others ahead of your own wellbeing. But taking time for yourself is not selfish. Everybody needs space to unwind and relax, and giving yourself permission to take some time to recharge your batteries means that you will hopefully have more energy and patience to meet the needs of your family. Start by trying to give yourself 10 minutes each day where you can just sit down, have a cup of tea and take a breather.

'You often get told to give some time for yourself. This doesn't need to be outside of the house. You can do this however you want, even if its going to the next room and eating some chocolate.'

Getting things done

At times you might find that your 'list of things to do' can build up. This could be general errands, shopping for vital items, or general admin. If these tasks are weighing on your mind compile a to-do list that you can tick off as you go along prioritising those activities which need to be done that day or week. This includes setting aside quality time with your children and time for yourself. Just seeing everything written down may help make things seem more manageable and identify things which really aren't urgent. And remember it is fine and healthy to sometimes have a down day.

'I've had to learn how to not feel guilty about not getting everything I wanted to get done. A mixture of self-compassion and having realistic expectations to begin with.'

Ask for help

Asking for help from others can sometimes feel as if we're failing as a parent or carer, but parenting can be tough and reaching out for support is nothing to feel ashamed of. Whether it's minding your child for a short time to allow you to get things done or running a small errand for you, friends and family will often be happy to help and children and young people can also benefit from knowing there are other trusted adults in their life that your family can turn to. Depending on the age of the child, you can also ask them to complete age-appropriate

tasks to help around the house to relieve you of some of the everyday tasks.

'It's so important to take help where you can. Try to be specific about the help you need and when you need it as this will often help others know what is required and how they can help.'

Looking after yourself - Maintaining energy levels

Looking after your physical health can have a positive impact on your mental and emotional wellbeing. A healthy and balanced diet can help how you feel physically and avoiding certain foods can help if you're feeling low or anxious. Regular exercise doesn't need to mean running 5ks but may include regular walks, sit-down yoga or visualisation.

'Making time to exercise is really important even if it's just walking around the block with your baby in a pram.'

The importance of sleep

Balanced sleep is really important for good mental health but it can also be a really useful self-care tool for when you need a break to get away from your thoughts or situation for a bit. Trying to establish good sleep routines for your children can be the first step to giving you time at night to relax and allow you to get a good night sleep for yourself. This may be harder with babies and infants but even with older children you may benefit from allowing yourself a power nap in the daytime whilst they are at school.

'My partner would often have to work late so every now and again I would ask a friend to babysit whilst I slept upstairs knowing my children were safe and entertained downstairs.'

Staying connected - Check in with trusted friends

If your child is struggling with their mental health, it can impact enormously on your own mental health. It may be especially hard if you feel that those closest to you struggle to understand what's happening to you or give you a sense of feeling judged as a parent. Being able to open up to an empathetic friend or family member can help and choosing the right person is important as some people may struggle to understand the impact of living with a child struggling with their mental health. Try to identify one or two friends you can call on and share how you feel at any time who you know will be supportive. Who can not only offer a shoulder to cry on but who can make you laugh and feel better about yourself. If you do feel isolated or alone, you may find a support group nearby or online or find the AFC Crisis Messenger service or the support line offered by Family Lives helpful.

"Reach out to someone who knows you well, maybe your oldest friends who truly understand you, who will listen and not make you feel judged as a parent, who can empathise and not give advice. Or there may be times when you do not want to talk about things at all, but just be with someone who can distract you, make you laugh and just forget about it all for a while."

It's okay to say 'no'

Often when we're struggling, it may feel hard to balance how we're feeling with the expectations that may be placed on us by ourselves or our family. There is lots of advice about setting healthy boundaries and interpersonal effectiveness worksheets online which can help you communicate your needs without seeming aggressive or feeling guilty about neglecting the needs of others. Remember you have the right to say yes or no without having to explain your reasons.

'It's important to have your own voice and to not let others tell you what you should be doing or what you need.'

Free time - Time away from social media

Sometimes a 24/7 engagement with instant messaging and social media can feel a bit relentless and stressful. Some people say they stay on devices out of habit. Just as you might limit your children's time on devices, try to set a time when you will put the phone down and unwind with your family. You can also curate your social media by only following accounts that make you feel good and blocking or ignoring accounts which may make you feel angry, low or depressed. Limiting use of devices can also help you have 'good sleep' which in turn can help with your energy levels and mental wellbeing.

'As much as I love my phone and everything I use it for, I feel like I'd be much less anxious without it.'

Remember your passions

Before you became a parent or carer, you may have had hobbies or passions which have fallen by the wayside. Finding time to engage in activities which you enjoy can boost your self-esteem and have a positive impact on your own wellbeing. Whether its baking, crafting, creative writing, or drawing and painting, there are many activities you can do at home that needn't cost too much and can give you a sense of pride when the activity is complete. Of course, you may prefer to join a choir or local drama group or even just taking time to listen to music that you like rather than what your kids like can prove beneficial.

'Doing something that I love and that I've loved since before I had children helps me to feel energised and more 'myself'. It's good to remember who I am outside of being a parent.'

Additional Support

Whilst self-care is important, it is important to recognise that if you are struggling as a parent or carer with your mental health and wellbeing that you know that there is help and support out there for you. Your GP should be able to offer help and support and, if necessary, refer you to an adult mental health service. Where possible, try to talk to a trusted friend or relative so they are also aware of how you're feeling and can check in on you. The below organisations also offer crisis support for parents and carers:

AFC Crisis Messenger – text AFC to 85258 for free 24/7 crisis support - <https://www.annafreud.org/crisis/>

Family Lives – charity offering crisis support for parents and carers - <https://www.familylives.org.uk/>

Remember to look after yourselves during these challenging times, and together we can keep our children safe and happy.

Wishing you all a very happy and safe holiday.

Halina Rooney

Deputy Head of Inclusion/SENCo