

Self-care tips for parents of children with mental health problems

When your energy is focused on someone else's needs it can be easy to neglect your own. If your own stress levels build up they may start having a negative impact on other things.

Give your own physical and mental health a high priority

You cannot be much use to others if you are struggling yourself. It's important to recognise the traumatic impact dealing with someone else's pain can have and try to be aware of any feelings or negative effects that develop. Think about some simple things that might help you cope and remember them for when you're starting to feel stressed.

Self-care strategies to help parents cope

- Many people find that taking big deep belly breaths helps. You can do this by sending the breath into your tummy instead of your chest and inflating it like a balloon. Hold it in for a few seconds and then slowly let it out. Just doing 3 or 4 of these can make a big difference.
<https://www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/resources/patient-information/therapies/abdominal-breathing.pdf>
- During moments of crisis, putting the adrenaline towards aerobic activity such as jogging or even fast walking can help to reduce anxiety and tension and distract the mind from the thoughts that cause them.
- The body's physiological systems can't differentiate between anxiety and excitement, which means that it is possible to convince yourself that it's the latter rather than the former by thinking of something exciting, by whooping and cheering or by singing a song associated with excitement.
- Another thing that helps is one-minute mindfulness, where you just take a minute out and become conscious of your breathing and your senses. It helps you to calm down and get away from all the thoughts running around your head.

Things to avoid if you're struggling

- Try to avoid fighting what you can't change and focus instead on what you can.
- While TV and other news media can give you a distraction, bad news headlines often paint an unrealistic picture of the world that can make you feel worse.
- Constantly seeing positive posts of friends and family on social media can make it seem like everyone's life is amazing compared to yours. It's best to limit your exposure to it and recognise that what you're seeing is the aggregated highlights of what people want you to see and not the reality.

Focus on the future

Seeing light at the end of the tunnel can really lift your spirits, but it requires some kind of a roadmap and a way of recognising and appreciating progress. If you can work on this together as a family the progress you make will not only make you feel closer, but it will also ensure that you're all heading in the same direction.

Tips for maintaining a positive outlook

- Difficult times are when we tend to learn the most. Try to view challenges and mistakes as part of a learning curve where each experience is making you better prepared for future challenges.
- Breaking big challenges down into smaller portions can make them more manageable and makes it easier to feel a sense of accomplishment when you achieve goals along the way.
- Allow yourself to find the humour in even the most difficult moments, and when things are tough remember that what's happening will probably make for a great story in the future.
- Whenever it feels as though everything is against you, think of the things in your life that you are grateful for, like people who are important to you or even just the occasional little pleasures. Gratitude can help you to keep things in perspective.
- Build resilience by reminding yourself of previous occasions when you've come through adversity and gained valuable experience.
- Remember that while you can't change the past, you can change the future. Try to visualise and focus on creating the future you are aiming for.

Some additional resources that may help.

- NHS advice for supporting the mental wellbeing of others. Better Health: Every Mind matters <https://www.nhs.uk/every-mind-matters/supporting-others/childrens-mental-health/>
- For information on how to access NHS Mental health services visit <https://www.nhs.uk/nhs-services/mental-health-services/>