

Solutions is a parent newsletter published by ESS during the school year. Each issue highlights an important topic related to children's mental health and provides practical applications for parents in the home environment.

Caring for Your Child by Caring for Yourself

When an individual becomes a parent for the first time, there is an almost immediate shift of priorities. Time, money, space, and other family resources are typically focused on the health and well-being of the new tiny family member, and many parents indefinitely set aside their own needs and priorities.

This is especially true for parents whose children have special challenges, including physical, mental health, or learning problems. Parents whose children struggle in this way typically devote so much time and energy to their children that they neglect their own health and well-being. And, while this behavior is understandable, it is also true that to ignore self-care is extremely harmful for parents. The stress of parenting can cause physical, mental, emotional and behavioral changes in adults, and these changes in turn affect their children.

The first step in prioritizing self-care is to **understand how you experience stress**. Do you get headaches? Have sleep problems? Are you filled with worry or negative thoughts? Do you feel irritable, angry, anxious or depressed much of the time? Are you withdrawing from people, overeating, or using alcohol to relax or fall asleep?

The next step is to **identify the events or situations that most often trigger stressful feelings** (e.g. work problems, conflict in relationships, money problems, your child's school struggles) and **your typical ways of coping** with these stressors. Are you making healthy or unhealthy choices?

The parents of ESS students are encouraged to begin their self-care journeys by talking with their child's clinician. ESS clinicians are skilled in family therapy as well as cognitive-behavioral stress management techniques, so they are perfect partners for designing a realistic self-care plan. A good place to start is by challenging one's expectations and self-talk. Expecting that you'll never find time for yourself, or never make a mistake, or labeling yourself a bad or inadequate parent,

will get in the way of effective problem solving. While negative, self-critical thoughts are inevitable from time to time, it is important to practice more balanced, self-forgiving thoughts (e.g. "I'm doing the best I can; I can learn from my mistakes; there is no perfect parent").

There are many other self-care choices to consider as well, including:

- Spend one minute in bed each morning planning how and when you'll spend 15 minutes on self-care; end each day writing down 1 or 2 things that happened that you are grateful for (e.g. a conversation with a co-worker; a delicious sandwich for lunch; your child doing his chores).
- Consider one or two small nutrition and/or exercise changes for the family to work on together.
- Talk to other parents about the stress of parenting – online, at school, at family gatherings, within religious communities. Create and utilize support networks for both practical help (e.g. car pools) and emotional support.
- Download a free mindfulness app such as "Mindfulness Coach" and practice 5-8 minutes a day.
- Take a break each day from your devices - they add to feelings of being overwhelmed by creating the expectation of an immediate response.
- Practice saying "no" to additional responsibilities.
- Accept without self-judgment the negative thoughts and feelings that can accompany the hard work of parenting ("I want to run away", "I'm not cut out to be a parent").

RESOURCES:

Psychology Today. 25 Simple Self-Care Tools for Parents, posted Aug 18, 2017 by Erin Leyba LCSW, Ph.D.
APA.org. Parenting: Being Supermom stressing you out?
peps.org. Self-care for Parents.

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