

SELF-CARE

A Parent's Guide to Taking Care of Yourself in Order to Care For Your Child

(Adapted from the video interviews @ courageousparentsnetwork.org/video-library/caring-for-the-family/self-care/).



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If you make it a point to take care of yourself, you will be better able to take care of your child.

Self care is often a low priority when your child is diagnosed with a serious illness. You must take care of your child who now has urgent and complex medical needs, manage appointments and service providers, learn new information about disease and medical treatment – all while you are tending to the needs of all members of the family. Your role has unexpectedly changed. Making time for yourself may be the first thing to go.

The truth is, if you don't take care of yourself, physically and emotionally, it will become much harder to take care of your child and everything else that you need to manage. Without enough sleep and nourishment, you might feel tired and unable to think clearly. You will have less energy to get through long days of medical appointments, school meetings, therapies and caregiving. It might feel harder to cope, solve problems, and to keep your emotions in check. It is normal to feel sad, angry and impatient at times, but if you are completely worn down, those feelings might be overwhelming and will impact your ability to care for others.

Things we tell ourselves that are probably not true:

I can't leave my child's bedside. There's no one else to care for my child.

I'm the only one who knows how to care for my child.

I am the only one who can comfort my child.

Taking care of myself takes more time, or money, or resources than I have.

It would be selfish of me to leave my child or my other children to do something for myself.

I don't have time to take care of myself.

These thoughts are all natural and understandable. It might help to consider them from a different viewpoint:

If your child is in the hospital, there are nurses and aides nearby whose job it is to keep your child safe. You may not feel that you can trust them—they begin as strangers. But you can step away for a brief time to get a cup of coffee, some food,

some fresh air, or just to take a shower. Over time, you may come to trust them so that you can comfortably leave your child's bedside for a brief period of time.

If your child is at home, you may have a caregiver or family member who is home at the same time. They can keep your child safe while you take a break and do something for yourself.

It may certainly be true that you are your child's favorite person who makes them feel most comfortable and safe. But that doesn't mean that you are the *only* person who can care for your child. Children are more resilient than we think. It is most important, for you and your child, that you are able to step away periodically. Separation can be difficult but it's normal and it's necessary, and healthy for both of you. Your child might even enjoy the company and companionship of somebody new.

It also doesn't mean that your child feels abandoned when you step away. If your child is cognitively aware, you may find it helpful to explain to them that you need to have some alone time every now and then to help you be the best parent you can be.

Almost like when you had a newborn, take advantage of when you're child is sleeping. Nap when they do. Or - use that time to do something that makes you feel good – watch TV, call a friend, meditate, exercise, write or take a hot shower or bath.

Taking care of yourself doesn't need to take a lot of time or be expensive. There are lots of things you can do that don't cost anything and that make you feel better. Whatever it is that brings you joy is what you should focus on. It could be as simple as sitting in silence for a few minutes a day, reading a book, or taking a walk.

It is not selfish to take care of yourself. The opposite is true: when you are healthy and strong, you are a better caregiver to your child.

Ways to Take Care of Yourself

Any time you make for yourself is a form of self-care and helps you be a more patient, calmer caregiver for your child. Here are a few ways to take care of yourself. Even a few minutes a day can be rejuvenating.

Take a nap

Sleep is always an excellent idea and probably the single most important thing we need when we are caring for a medically complex child. With rest, we gain patience and perspective and are better able to solve problems.

Get exercise and fresh air

Go to the gym, go for a run, take a walk, watch an exercise video. Sit outside in the sun and breathe in some fresh air for a few minutes.

Meditate

Sit in silence, or download a guided meditation.

Try yoga

Yoga can be rigorous exercise or gentle stretching. It always makes you feel better.

Talk to a therapist

If this is possible for you financially, talking to a neutral third party professional, such as a grief counselor, a psychologist, or a therapist can be a helpful relief. Priests and chaplains are also excellent and wise listeners that do not cost any money. By talking to someone who is not your friend or family member, you can dump the feelings, fears, and worries that you might not want to share with anyone else. A good therapist will help you recognize your strengths and find solutions to problems. Sometimes, this resource will be available to you at no charge through palliative care or social workers. If you are part of an online support group, it can also be helpful to talk your concerns through with other parents who “get it.”

Spend time with a friend

Taking care of a sick child can be isolating. Time with a friend helps reconnect you to your bigger world. Sharing your feelings with someone you trust helps you feel normal. And it can also be a relief to listen to someone else talk about their life.

Watch a TV show or movie

Television shows and movies are a great form of escape. Comedies are particularly good because they make you laugh, and laughter is always helpful.

Write

Taking your feelings out of your heart and your worries out of your head and putting them all onto the page can be a relief. It can also help you process your experience. By putting your experience onto the page, you see how much you are doing, how you are trying, how good a parent you are being to your child, and you are also able to see where you are struggling and may need some extra help.

Pray

Prayer is really just a conversation you have with yourself in which you ask for help. You don't have to be religious to pray.

Eat and try to eat well

Food is a simple pleasure and is a gift you give yourself. It feeds your minds as well as your body. Good food makes you feel better and gives you energy to cope with everything you need to deal with. It helps to bring healthy snacks with you to the hospital for long appointments and inpatient stays.

Go shopping

A little retail therapy never hurts. Even getting out of the house to browse can be fun and a nice change of scenery.

Play

Spend time playing, snuggling and doing "typical" things with your other children, if you have them.

Go on a date

A little goes a long way. Even an occasional evening out can help you connect with your partner and feel normal.

Ask for help

Asking for help is not a sign of weakness. It is a sign of strength and is a way to help you take care of yourself.

