

A Parent's Guide to Self-Care



Guidance from

Nancy Frumer-Styron, Psy.D

Psychologist and Content Director, Courageous Parents Network
and contributing parent Barbara Swoyer



INTRODUCTION

A low priority that is actually a must

It's easy to view self-care as a low priority when your child is diagnosed with a serious illness. Your role as a parent and parenting partner has unexpectedly changed. The child has urgent and complex medical needs; you must manage appointments and service providers, and learn new information about disease and medical treatment—all while tending to the needs of other family members, work and/or other responsibilities. Making time for yourself may be the first thing to go.

When you take care of yourself, you are better able to take care of your child

If you don't see to your own physical and emotional needs, it will become much more difficult to manage all of your responsibilities. It is normal to feel sad, angry and impatient at times, but if you are completely worn down, those feelings might become utterly overwhelming and impact your ability to focus. Without enough sleep and nourishment, you might not be able 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. When your tank is empty, it's hard to keep going.

(continued)



Myths about self-care

We sometimes push away taking care of ourselves with things we tell ourselves that aren't necessarily true. Here are some common examples.

- 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.
- My child will feel abandoned if I leave them.
- 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, but it can help to consider if they are really true and see how you might change your point of view.

If your child is in the hospital, there are nurses and aides nearby whose job it is to keep them safe. At first you may not feel that you can trust others—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 will likely come to know and trust the nurses and aides, so that you can comfortably leave your child's bedside for some 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 the person who makes your child 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 important for both you and your child that you are able to step away periodically. Separation can be difficult, but it's normal and necessary, and healthy for both of you. Your child might even enjoy the company and companionship of somebody new.

Your child doesn't necessarily feel abandoned when you step away. If they are cognitively aware, you may find it helpful to explain that you need to have some alone time every now and then, to help you be the best parent you can be.

(continued)

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. Take advantage of times when your child is sleeping. Nap when they do. Or, use that time to do something that makes you feel good. Whatever it is that brings you joy is what you should focus on.

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 and family. Even a few minutes a day can be rejuvenating. Here are some suggestions of ways to take care of yourself.

- **Rest**

We all need sleep, and we especially need it under stressful conditions. With rest, we gain patience and perspective and are better able to solve problems.

- **Exercise and fresh air**

Be active: go to the gym, go for a run, take a walk, swim, play tennis or golf, watch an online exercise video. Or just get outside and breathe in some fresh air for a few minutes.

- **Yoga**

The rigorous exercise or gentle stretching can be calming and energizing. Take a class or watch an online video, for example.

- **Meditation**

Sit in silence, or download a guided meditation or daily meditation app.

- **Prayer**

Some people are comforted by prayer, with or without a community or spiritual leader. You don't have to be religious to pray.

- **Talk therapy**

If this is possible for you financially, talking to a neutral third party professional, such as a grief counselor, psychologist, social worker or other therapist, can be a helpful relief. Spiritual leaders (ministers, priests, rabbis, imams, chaplains, etc.) are also excellent and wise listeners, and do not charge for their services. In talking to someone who is not your friend or family member, you can express 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.

- **Support group**

Support groups are available in many communities, and they are also conducted online. It can be helpful to talk your concerns through with other parents who understand what you are experiencing. Many disease groups also offer online discussion groups.

(continued)

- **Friends**

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.

- **Media**

Movies and videos are all a great form of escape. Comedies are particularly good because they make you laugh, and laughter is always helpful. If you enjoy sports, watching your favorite athletes or rooting for your favorite teams can provide a sense of fun.

- **Creative expression**

If you like to write, putting your feelings and worries onto the page can be a relief. It can also help you process your experience. You will see how much you are doing, how hard you are trying, how good a parent you are being to your child. Writing may also help you see where you are struggling and may need some extra help. On the other hand, writing about something not related to your child may provide just the relief you need. The same is true for dancing, drawing, painting, sculpting, quilting, scrapbooking, weaving and all other forms of creative expression. Making or just listening to music can also be very nourishing.

- **A favorite treatment**

Massage, acupuncture, manicure, pedicure or haircut can make you feel more normal and like yourself.

- **Eat well**

Food is a simple pleasure and is a gift you give yourself. It feeds your mind 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. And treats—such as the occasional cupcake—can spark real joy.

- **Shop**

A little retail therapy might feel good. Just getting out of the house to browse can feel like a good change.

- **Play**

Spend time playing, snuggling and doing favorite activities.

- **Reconnect with your partner**

A walk, drive or even an occasional evening out can help you feel more connected. If the partnership is feeling fragile, you might consider talking together with a therapist.

- **Ask for help**

Asking for help is a sign of strength and is a way to help you take care of yourself.

Work can also be a form of self-care

Most of us work because we need to, or want to, earn a living for ourselves and our families. But for many, work is also an important part of our identity. We value the contributions we make; we value our colleagues and collaborations. Work also presents opportunities to learn new concepts and new skills and to express ourselves outside of being a parent. These can be forms of self-care, too.

Some parents struggle with the need—or desire—to work while their child is ill. There is no right answer here. Unless you have or can negotiate a role where you can be at home, working will take you away from your child. On the other hand, working may help you feel that you are helping to sustain your family and that you have some routine outside of the home. A conversation with your manager or human resources professional may help you assess how to be most effective at work while caring for your child.



CONCLUSION

Not a luxury—a necessity

It is not selfish to take care of yourself. The opposite is true: when you are healthy and strong, you are more resilient and better able to cope with the demands and responsibilities of your life.