

Parent resource

Understanding emotions and the importance of self-care

while supporting a young person
with an eating disorder



Understanding emotions and the importance of self-care

This resource explores some of the difficult emotions that often come up for parents while they're supporting a child or young person with an eating disorder.

It's here to provide a gentle reminder to parents that it's okay and understandable to feel these emotions while supporting a loved one.

It encourages parents to prioritise self-care to balance these feelings, even though it may seem indulgent during a crisis.

Self-care is crucial for maintaining resilience and distress tolerance.



Common feelings parents experience while supporting a child with an eating disorder:

Self doubt

When young people are struggling, many parents say they blame themselves, asking themselves if they are at fault. You might be thinking: “Am I doing something wrong?”

This can be particularly difficult if you’re finding it hard to get the right support for your child, if interventions you have tried already aren’t working, or if services aren’t listening. This leaves some parents feeling as if they had “failed” their young person – especially when comparing themselves to other families they know or see on social media.

Feeling guilty

Many parents share that they feel guilty about taking time to look after themselves. They feel the demands of parenting require more attention than their own wellbeing. Time spent looking after themselves feels “indulgent”.

Parents also often share that they feel guilty about what their child is going through, and that those feelings made their own mental health worse. Some say they felt “powerless” to help their child, making them feel even more guilty.



Common feelings parents experience while supporting a child with an eating disorder:

Loneliness

Parenting is challenging and can be even harder if your child is going through something too. You might not feel able to speak about what's going on with other parents/carers or are comparing yourself to people online. You might have opened about your own or your child's mental health and been left feeling misunderstood.

Burnout

Even if your child isn't struggling with their mental health, parenting can be exhausting. Your young person may experience all sorts of challenges. And you might be balancing parenting alongside work, financial pressures, housework, other caring responsibilities, and any number of other tasks. This can make it very difficult to take the time and space to look after yourself, leaving you physically and emotionally exhausted.

For those supporting a child with their mental health, there are additional pressures to manage family dynamics, balancing the needs of other children and partners while one child is in crisis. You might feel pulled in lots of different directions.



If these feelings are coming up for you...

All these feelings are completely normal. And they're also worth paying attention to. As you would support a loved one experiencing self-doubt, burnout, or loneliness, your own feelings are valid and worthy of time, attention, and care.

There are also lots of things you can do to help with these feelings, and ways to build in small steps to your daily routine to help you cope.

In the following pages, we take a look at strategies for staying well when times are challenging.



Steps to self-care

Small achievable gestures of self-care

Some parents who work with us say that they spend five or ten minutes a day doing something that makes them feel good – listening to a favourite song, taking a break for a cup of tea, or texting friends to let them know how they are. Sometimes those small steps make all the difference.

Shared activities

Looking after yourself doesn't mean doing things alone – in fact, many parents say that shared activities with their children help them decompress and look after themselves. Try crafting, going for a walk, watching a TV show you enjoy, cooking together, playing board games, or just taking five minutes to share parts of your day together.

Creativity

Research suggests that creativity can be great for our mental health. Whether it's knitting, painting, cross-stitch, collaging, carpentry or writing. Creativity can help you express yourself emotionally, engage in mindfulness, and have fun while you're at it. You could also share this with the rest of the family to connect as well as unwind.



Steps to self-care

The outdoors

Some parents tell us that they struggle to get out and about, despite knowing that nature is great for their mental health. Research also suggests that nature can have a hugely beneficial effect on our mood and levels of anxiety and stress.

You can't always spend hours outdoors. But even a ten-minute walk, or five minutes with a cup of tea in the garden, can help you reconnect with nature and yourself.

Physical activity

We all know that exercise can help our physical and mental health. Think about how to incorporate this into your daily life. There are lots of options.

This isn't about spending hours in the gym. Some parents tell us that going for walks with their children helps. Others cultivate yoga practices using online guides. Some use activities like gardening. And for some people, even five minutes dancing to their favourite song is enough to boost their mood.



Remember yourself

These tips aren't going to remove the stresses and strains from your life. But having a self-care practice can be a good way of keeping yourself well and can act as a reminder that you deserve to look after yourself too.

Supporting materials

'Five Ways to Wellbeing' principle (NHS)

Read the report here: [https://new-economicsf.files.svdcdn.com/production/files/five-ways-to-wellbeing-1.pdf?dm=1584709195](https://new-economics.files.svdcdn.com/production/files/five-ways-to-wellbeing-1.pdf?dm=1584709195)

