

Wellbeing and self-care

Having a baby is life-changing. It can deliver a lot of love, joy and fulfilment but it can also create demands and responsibilities that feel relentless, difficult and scary. Sometimes, parents have difficulty adjusting to the many physical, emotional, psychological and social challenges of parenting.

On the helpline, we hear from parents who are consumed by caring for their children and doing a wonderful job of it. But self-care has become a low priority.

We know that the stress, interrupted sleep and 24-hour demands can take their toll. But they become more manageable when we are able to care for and nurture ourselves too. Some aspects of self-care are covered here, including sleep, diet, exercise, time out and social supports.

Sleep

For many parents, the interrupted sleep can take a mental, physical and emotional toll. Some general rules for sleep hygiene include:

- Go to bed at the same time each day
- Avoid exercise before bed
- Make the bedroom as restful an environment as possible
- Avoid screentime or other stimulating activities just before bed
- Avoid caffeine and other stimulants in the evening
- Try a warm bath or shower two hours before bed to regulate your body temperature for sleep
- Avoid a nap in the evening
- If you can't sleep, get up and do something quiet in another room.

Quick naps can improve your alertness and help in decision-making, creativity and sensory perception. Short naps, such as 20 minutes, are less likely to disrupt your sleep at night.

Eating

Many new parents' diet and appetite are affected. Time constraints, hormonal and mood changes all play a part in this. In turn, diet and appetite can impact on our mood, on our energy levels and our capacity to get through the day.

If you struggle to find time to prepare food for yourself during the day, having some small, protein-based snacks such as yoghurt or nuts on hand can help. Keeping a bottle of water handy is also useful as dehydration can make you feel irritable and tired.

Some parents find themselves snacking on convenience food. We know that setting realistic goals helps. Healthy, home-cooked food for every meal may not be an achievable goal so make sure to cut yourself some slack.

Set goals for your family that are manageable and allow for something easier, such as eggs on toast or toasted sandwiches, on difficult days.

Exercise

For some people, regular physical exercise is highly beneficial. We know that it can increase serotonin levels - a hormone that contributes to general happiness and wellbeing. We also know that getting out of the house into fresh air and sunshine can lift mood and boost vitamin D.

However, setting achievable goals is important. These goals depend on personal circumstances, previous exercise history and physical recovery from birth.

It can be helpful to schedule in exercise time. When your baby is small, this could be as simple as aiming for a short walk in the morning with the baby in the pram.

For some mums, childbirth impacts on pelvic floor function. Physiotherapists can help with assessment, treatment and strengthening exercises if this is an issue. If you have any concerns about your physical recovery, it is important to consult a doctor before you undertake any strenuous exercise after birth.

Exercise may also mean something gentler to some people, such as breathing exercises, meditation or a yoga class. Some people find these beneficial.

Many websites and phone apps provide short guided meditations or relaxation exercises, some specifically for new parents.

Social network

Being at home with a baby after years of being in a busy workplace can be an isolating experience for some parents. New and existing social networks can help you feel connected to other adults.

New mothers' groups and playgroups are one avenue. Others include free activities, such as story time at the local library, while other people seek connection through online groups, such as supportive Facebook pages. If you are struggling with postnatal mental health issues, there might be a supported playgroup you may be able to attend in your area. These are often run by a health worker or social worker and attended by other parents who have been struggling.

Time out

Time out means different things to everyone. But in general, it is important that parents who are primary carers have a break from the caring role at times. We speak to many parents who experience barriers to this. Sometimes the barrier is a time constraint, sometimes it is driven by a parent feeling guilty or feeling like they shouldn't need time out from their family.

Some families find the best way to create time out is to structure it i.e. a set time or activity each week for the primary carer.

The additional benefit is that the other parent or carer gets one-on-one time with the baby or child, which can also help with their bonding and confidence.

Generally, a parent needing time to themselves gets most benefit if the rest of the family is out of the house, or if the parent can go out themselves. Some ideas for nurturing time out are:

- A class or activity outside the home
 - Engaging in a hobby/craft that is enjoyable
 - Taking a relaxing bath
 - Going for a walk
 - Going shopping
 - Listening to music
 - Reading a book/magazine
 - Watching a movie

- Meeting friends for a coffee/lunch/dinner/drink
- Having a massage or pedicure.

Self-compassion

Finding the space for self-compassion and gentleness can be hard for parents who are irritable, tired and under pressure. We hear from parents who have set high standards for themselves and carry that attitude into parenthood. This might leave little room for mistakes or self-compassion when things don't go to plan. Some people refer to this as perfectionism.

In addition, many parents have certain expectations of how parenting will be. If and when the realities are different, it can trigger feelings of frustration, fear and even grief for what might have been. When we practise self-compassion, we allow these feelings and reactions to come up and create room for acceptance of them without harsh judgement or criticism. In essence, we give ourselves the same kindness and care we would offer a good friend if they were struggling.

Mental health/professional support

For parents, recognising that you are struggling is the first step. For some, this may manifest as obvious symptoms of anxiety, depression or other issues such as obsessive compulsive disorder. For others, it may be more subtle, just a sense of not quite coping, feeling low in energy or not feeling yourself.

Callers to the helpline often comment on their relief at being able to talk about what is on their mind. For some people, it is helpful to talk to family or friends. But often, for varied reasons, this is not helpful or possible.

Discussing your concerns with a mental health professional or a helpline such as PANDA is a good option in these cases. It is helpful, if possible, to build a positive relationship with a local GP. New parents with babies often visit their GP for the baby's sake but we encourage callers to connect for their own sake too. GPs are often the first point of professional contact for mental health concerns.

Self-care is partly about reaching out to others when we need it. There are other options for professional support beyond a GP – facilitated playgroups, psychologists and counsellors – that your GP or PANDA can help you access.

