

Parent and Carer Wellbeing

Information for parents and carers



When your child is diagnosed with a health condition, or is going through treatment at the hospital, you can be faced with a whole host of new challenges. You have to take care of your child who now needs additional support, and this can be a challenge for any family. You might have been through a scary journey to get to this point, and understandably you might feel like you are in shock from such an unexpected event. Some parents describe themselves going into 'survival mode'. In such difficult circumstances everyone can react differently, depending on their own past experiences and coping strategies.

Some parents might focus on trying to get through each day. There may be some days where you feel okay, and other days when you feel that it is all a bit too much. It is okay to experience strong and frightening emotions even though you might be trying very hard to 'hold it all together'. This is normal - it is likely a very difficult time for you and your family.

What is most important is that you look after yourself as much as possible throughout this time. Whether this is all completely new, you are in the middle of treatment, or are years beyond this, it is important to get the support that you need to stay well. This leaflet has some strategies on different ways you can look after yourself.

Well-being tips

When you are on a plane and the flight attendants are giving their pre-flight safety instructions, one of the first things they tell you is: "that in the case of a change in cabin pressure, you should first put on your own oxygen mask before helping anyone else, even your own children". This is because in order to look after others around you, you need to first look after yourself. If you don't, you can end up feeling burnt out and more stressed, which can make things even harder to manage.

However, this can be really difficult to do because for many people, it's not their first instinct. This is a normal response as you want to protect your child, but in the long run it can be less effective. You might feel "guilty" for putting your own needs ahead of others. It might also feel like the more stressed you are, the less time you have for self-care. However, the more stressed you become, the more important it is for you to make this time.

Everyone has different preferences for what self-care looks like. Here are some ideas of how you can practice self-care:

Time to yourself: Try and take some time out just for you. It's important to get little breaks when you can and grab a moment alone for yourself. This could be taking a bath, going for a walk to get fresh air, taking yourself out for a meal or doing an activity you enjoy.

Talk to others: Being honest about your feelings to your loved ones can help to share your worries and concerns which can help them understand what you're going through. You can also reach out to family and friends to help support with practical, everyday tasks, such as housework or doing school runs for a sibling.

Getting enough rest: This means having healthy sleeping habits. Sleep is vital to our mental and physical health and overall quality of life. However, we know how hard it can be to follow good sleep hygiene when your child is unwell. So, try to do what you can with the tips below:

- Try to keep to a bedtime routine and stick to it (e.g. go to bed at the same time every night)
- Wind down 2-3 hours before bed
- Avoid using screens about 30 minutes before you sleep (e.g. watching TV, scrolling on your phone)
- Limit caffeine intake (e.g. try to avoid consuming caffeine 3-7 hours before bed)
- Exercise regularly
- Go to bed only when you're tired. If you cannot fall asleep within 20—30 minutes, try getting out of bed, doing a relaxing activity to help you unwind, and then try going back to bed when you're tired again.

Eating: Try and keep to regular mealtimes and stay hydrated. It can be difficult to plan meals when your child is ill or in hospital. Some meal options can include a visit to the hospital canteen or cafe as well as arranging food deliveries with your family or friends.

Relaxation exercises: These can be really helpful to help manage feelings of stress, anxiety and worry. Regularly practicing these can help shift our thoughts and feelings. Everyone is different and will have a preference as to what they find more helpful. Here are some ideas:

• Try calming activities, such as colouring or distraction techniques.	
• Breathing techniques can be beneficial to practise in the long term (e.g. breathing in to the count of 4, holding for 4, and breathing out for 4). www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Dv-ldGLnIY	
• Progressive muscle relaxation (PMR) is helpful when your body is feeling tense. It is a technique used to help you relax your muscles (e.g. you could try and tense your major muscle groups for 5 seconds and then let go). www.youtube.com/watch?v=GZ9PHsbt-m4	
• Grounding techniques can help promote mindfulness and refocus our attention on the present moment. Take a deep breath, in through your nose and out through your mouth. Then try and name 5 things you can see, 4 things you can hear, 3 things you can touch, 2 things you can smell and 1 thing you can taste. www.youtube.com/watch?v=30VMIEmA114	

Speak to a professional: Talking to a counsellor or psychologist about how you're feeling can be a helpful way to talk through any issues and think about techniques that could help. If you are continuing to find things difficult, you can speak with your GP or medical team and they can make a referral for you to the right team to get support.

Further information for parents and carers:

<https://children.nhslothian.scot/parents-and-carers/>

