

PARENTING JOURNAL

COPING STRATEGIES FOR SINGLE PARENTING

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In our former article we highlighted that Parenting is the process of rearing and supporting the physical, emotional, social, and intellectual development of a child from infancy to adulthood and beyond.

This process is already filled with both joys and challenges and it was highlighted even more so for single parents. With the added challenge of the pandemic, parenting is even harder as everyone faces unprecedented conditions with little or no familial and governmental support due to stricter Covid-19 restrictions, economic constraints, and mounting personal caution.

So what can parents do to safeguard their mental health and minimise the onset of mental illness? Firstly, parents can learn to recognise the signs and symptoms of mental illness from the inception and make immediate attempts to treat with them:-

- Prolonged episodes of feeling sad or down
- Confused thinking or reduced ability to concentrate
- Excessive fears or worries, or extreme feelings of guilt
- Extreme mood changes of highs and lows
- Withdrawal from friends and activities
- Significant tiredness, low energy or problems sleeping
- Detachment from reality (delusions), paranoia or hallucinations

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- Inability to cope with daily problems or stress
- Trouble understanding and relating to situations and to people
- Problems with alcohol or drug use
- Major changes in eating habits
- Sex drive changes
- Excessive anger, hostility or violence
- Suicidal thinking

The following are some simple strategies to deal with mental illness before it becomes out-of control:

1. **Know yourself and recognise your symptoms.** Sometimes, it may be a fleeting stressor and everyone has the ability to be resilient. However, if you find that you cannot shake the feeling of anxiety, depression or hopelessness.....reach out and seek professional help. There are many organisations that offer counselling services both in-person and virtually. Seeking help is a sign of strength, not weakness.
2. **Mental reframing** involves taking an emotion or stressor and thinking of it in a different way. For example, instead of thinking “I am a failure because, I cannot provide for my family” Reframe that thought by thinking “I cannot do this particular thing right now but I’ve done this and this so far and I will try harder to improve this situation” Perfecting this technique can literally change your perspective in tough situations. But as you might imagine, this skill takes time and practice



3. Be aware of your emotions: We all have emotions so do not deny them or bottle them up because it will take a longer time to treat with them. Once you recognize what you are feeling, you can tackle it or whatever is causing it. So, if you're feeling anxious, let yourself be anxious for a couple of minutes—then meditate. If you're feeling angry, let yourself be angry—then listen to some calming music. Be in touch with your emotions. Accept that you are feeling a certain way, let yourself feel that way and then take action to diminish unhealthy feelings.

4. Practice Deep breathing- Even though you may not want to hear this, it actually works. It allows you to calm down and focus. It may not immediately solve the problem but it will give you a greater perspective on how to move forward to treat with the situation from a sense of calm and the best way to calm anxiety really is to breathe deeply. I often turn to the concept of “5 3 7” breathing:

- Breathe in for 5 seconds
- Hold the breath for 3 seconds
- Breathe out for 7 seconds

This gentle repetition sends a message to the brain that everything is okay (or it will be soon). Before long, your heart will slow its pace and you will begin to relax—sometimes without even realizing it.

5. Practice Self Care: Self-care is any activity that we do deliberately in order to take care of our mental, emotional, and physical health. Good self-care is key to improved mood and reduced anxiety. Exercise, ensure you get adequate rest, meditate/ pray, put aside at least half an hour for yourself to “do you” or take extra time in the shower to just breathe. Single parents especially mothers are notorious for putting themselves last while selflessly focusing on their children’s well-being. Now is an excellent moment to seek power through self-care and take charge of your health. Fitness and healthier eating make your body stronger, bolster the immune system, and even release endorphins that make you feel better.



6. Ask for help. There is no shame in asking for help. Reach out and talk to someone. Maybe a trusted friend, a spiritual advisor, a health care professional, an anonymous hotline. Sometimes in just talking to someone, you get the answers to a situation that you did not even consider. Asking for help is not a sign of weakness but a sign of strength.

These are a few tips that single parents can do to help themselves. Remember there are also hotlines and trained listeners available to hear and help you during a difficult moment or period. Mental health is everyone's concern and even more so when it comes to that of a Parent.

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