

Self-Care tips for Parents in our new Topsy-Turvy World

Introduction

If you are reading this, relax your shoulders, unclench your jaw and move your tongue from the top of your mouth. Relax. What do you notice? Inhale slowly for 3 (1.....2.....3) and out for 5 (1.....2.....3.....4.....5). Feel free to repeat before continuing to read and also to return here at any point as you want or need to.

The coronavirus pandemic has interrupted our daily life and turned some of what we know upside down. We will all be doing our best to reassure our children and young people, as we develop our 'new normal'. We are also likely managing our own anxieties, worries and potential resurfacing of past traumas too.

One of our jobs as parents is to help children with their emotions. Emotions can be bigger in times of uncertainty and even more so for children and young people with a history of trauma where change, loss and uncertainty have been all too familiar and scary.

Self-care is about getting the balance between being there for others without leaving yourself behind. Some of the strategies that you may have in your toolkit may be harder to access right now given our current restrictions and isolation. So, here are some tips to help you to develop a 'new normal' toolkit.

Staying regulated is the key for all of us in times of stress and uncertainty. Self-regulation refers to managing our own behaviour, thoughts and emotions. The one sure way to move from heightened arousal states to calmer ones is to introduce rhythm (Perry, 2006).



1. Exercise

Patterned, repetitive, rhythmic activity such as walking, running, dancing, singing, relaxation breathing (as used to start this tips leaflet) all help to soothe and calm a firing brainstem. This enables us to then connect to the other parts of our brain that allow us to relate to and connect with others and to plan, organise and think.

These can be done at home, on your own or with your child. See the following examples from Dr. Karen Treisman, and make use of other online resources and activities.

- ◆ *Hand or star breathing:* <https://youtu.be/NAldSdx-jps>
- ◆ *Muscle relaxation:* <https://youtu.be/FbhUxg9eHDE>
- ◆ *Rhythm breathing:* <https://youtu.be/e6z6TJ1wQDM>

Trying something new, fun and regulating can even tick off some of those self-development goals we carry around with us but never seem to find the time to do (it's not just me, right?)

A dysregulated adult cannot regulate a dysregulated child so it is vital that you take care of your own regulation needs. If you are feeling overwhelmed, take a couple of minutes to reflect and tag team (if you can) so that you can do what you need to do to feel regulated again.

2. Create or preserve structure and routine

This is easier said than done when our thinking and organising brains are hard to access, but tolerating stress and change is much easier for us all when the guide rails are up, think of bowling lanes here! (Mitchell 2020). Think practically here about waking time, meal times, bath time and bedtime. Exercising in the morning or afternoon is better and limiting screen time and media that is upsetting and worrying before bed is important. Sleep has many restorative and protective functions to help you manage the day ahead as well as to keep you healthy and well.



3. Social distancing doesn't mean emotional distancing

Connection with others is an important buffer in times of stress so continue to seek out emotional closeness. Reach out for and accept help when you need to. Setting up regular virtual family and friends time with apps like Zoom, Skype and FaceTime can also be helpful. You can encourage or set-up something similar for your child or young person too (depending on age, parental controls and online safety awareness). Games nights, karaoke, discos, learning, and exercise can all be done virtually. Have fun developing your own ways of being and staying connected but keep pulling on those invisible strings that connect you to others.



4. Schedule regular 'time-in'

This is a time for YOU to reflect on: How am I? How am I doing, feeling, being? What do I need more/less of? What have I done well this week? What could I have done differently? What do I want to change for next week?

What is important right now? What can I let go of? Mindfulness and relaxation practice can also be built into this time, for which there are various apps you can download, such as **Headspace**, if this would be helpful. You may also find others that speak to you and your particular needs.

5. Be gentle with yourself and practice self-compassion

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mentally well too. And, remember, taking care of yourself is part of taking care of your child, children and young people too.

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**Adoption
Psychology
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(Dr. Lin Yool, Clinical Psychologist,
Adoption Psychology Service)



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