

# Preventing Parent Burnout

## Meeting the emotional challenges of caring for children with mental health issues

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Parenting is hard work, and parenting a child with mental health issues is exponentially harder. You're almost certainly putting in more effort than any other mom or dad you know, yet your kid may still be at risk, struggling, or making less progress than her peers. This raises a crucial question: How can you keep going without becoming exhausted?

Avoiding parent burnout requires real effort. Experts note it includes consistent self-care, establishing a strong support network for yourself, and having a trustworthy therapeutic team for your child. Another piece of the puzzle is learning to tap into one of the most powerful motivators on earth: your love for your child. Here are 12 ideas for how to do that.

**Make a list of your child's core strengths.** Write down her good qualities, even if they haven't been visible lately. Find ways to talk about these to your partner, your friends and your child. "This morning I ran across that poem you wrote about \_\_\_\_\_, and it reminded me how creative you are. I've always admired that about you." (If your child mutters she is no longer like that, you can counter with a smile and something like, "Oh, deep down it's still there. Right now you're depressed, and no one is their best self when they are sick.")

**Recall fun and funny times.** Telling a humorous family incident or recounting a tale of your own foibles can help everyone feel connected. Silly baby stories, grade school antics, and memories of times you embarrassed yourself are great ways to get started laughing ... and remembering that good times *do* happen. Remembering more recent moments of happiness or enjoyment helps, too.

**Practice simple acts of kindness.** When using words is difficult, we can often still get through with gestures. Think back to what "said love" to her when she was little, or what used to soothe him when he was upset. Arriving at your teen's bedroom door with a gentle, "Hey, I thought maybe you'd like this" and a favorite treat can remind you both that you care, even if the offer is declined.

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**Smile when he walks in the room.** The look of surprise on a troubled child's face when he is greeted with joy instead of concern is a startling reminder of the importance of the need to express our affection in words and affect. A cheerful, "Oh, I was just thinking of you!" can shift both your heart and his to a better place.

**Grow your empathy.** Patience and perseverance blossom when we see parallels between our own emotional landscape and that of our children. When you're feeling overwhelmed, it's eye-opening to consider that this may be how your son feels all day, every day. A spike in your own anxiety or a wave of

feeling helpless can provide you with powerful insight into what's going on when your daughter gets panicky.

**Touch base, literally.** Sometimes we retreat from difficulty without realizing it. If your child craves contact and you've pulled back physically, add "Touch him three times daily" to your to-do list. A quick back rub when he's hunched over homework, or a gentle hand on his shoulder while you're asking a question can help you stay connected.

**Frame your frustration as a puzzle to be solved.** It may help to remind yourself that not-knowing how to make things better doesn't mean you're inadequate – it simply means you haven't figured it out yet. Read up on your child's diagnosis, and be utterly frank with your child's therapist about your need to learn better ways to handle your child's outbursts or irritability or anxiety attacks. Tackling this as a learning-curve problem alleviates a great deal of insecurity, and makes it easier to connect with the love you have for your child.

**Allow yourself to feel what you feel.** Set aside time to face your feelings over what your child's illness has done to him, to you, and to family life. Give yourself permission to grieve what you have lost. You are *not* a bad parent for resenting how your child's irritability or outbursts impact you; it's possible to love your child and hate the effects of his illness at the same time. The key is to find healthy ways to process what you feel.

**Notice the bright spots.** Write down one positive thing that happened every day, even if you have to hunt for the distant glimmer of light. You'll be surprised how much better you feel when you take time to do this. Go a step further and let your child know what you've observed, applauding her effort or catching her doing something good.

**Monitor your reactions to his behavior.** Sometimes a child's actions trigger old memories or reactions we thought we'd outgrown. It's unfortunate that when our offspring push our buttons, the buttons still belong to us — and we need to take responsibility for them. When we overreact to a situation, it may be a clue that it's time to work through longstanding issues for our own sake as well as for the sake of our kids.

**Connect with others.** Though mental illness isn't optional, the added burden of secrecy is. Opening up about what you're going through is likely to increase your emotional bandwidth significantly, giving you a much-needed infusion of energy. Confide in trusted friends, or find a support group for parents facing similar challenges (locally or on social media) to decrease your sense of isolation.

**Don't take your child's behavior personally.** Depressed, anxious, and impulsive kids say and do many hurtful things. Even though you are the target, this is usually more about their pain than about you. Take a few deep breaths and remind yourself that some portion of the venom is the illness talking. Then repeat silently to yourself, "My love is deeper than your pain," and respond to your child as calmly as you can.