



coping when your child is facing mental health challenges

Our greatest wish is to see our children flourish.

As parents, we experience tremendous stress when our kids are facing mental health challenges. We worry about their well-being, their safety, and their future. We struggle to secure services and supports for them and often face lengthy wait lists. We do our best to educate ourselves about the issues they are facing. Often, friends and family don't understand the challenges we face, making it difficult for them to support us. While we focus on our child who is facing challenges, other family members may feel neglected resulting in added family strain and increasing our own stress levels. It is our role as parents to be our child's advocate. Research indicates that children facing mental health challenges who have strong family support have better outcomes. As parents, we need support as well so that we can be strong and resilient for our kids.

1 Inform yourself

It's important to understand your child's situation in order to be the supporter and advocate your child needs. As you gain knowledge, it can help to reduce your stress and fear. There are many valuable sources of information available, in books and on reputable websites. A number of organizations offer family training and support along with community information sessions. Call our Parents' Helpline to find the best resources for you, and subscribe to our newsletter to stay informed. Remember, never be afraid to ask questions when you don't understand something or need clarification. This is new territory for you, so questions are not only needed but expected.

2 Get support—stay connected

At times of stress, we tend to isolate ourselves, which isn't helpful. Try not to let your feelings of sadness, despair or anger consume you. Consider spending time with a friend, or calling a person who cares about you - connecting with even one person can really make a difference. Sometimes family and friends don't understand and aren't sure how to help and support us. The stigma that sadly still exists can create a barrier for us to share what we are going through. Share factual information concerning your child's situation with those you trust and let them know how they can help. Think about joining a confidential support group. It can be empowering to make connections with people with similar experiences who can listen and support you in a non-judgmental way, and as you share stories and ideas, you may learn about new resources and coping skills. Call us or visit our website for information on PLEO's Parent Support Groups and others available for you.

3 Feelings of guilt serve little purpose

Questioning why this is happening and what you could have done differently is normal. We often feel that we have somehow failed our child. Our understanding of the biology of mental health challenges is growing, but there is still so much unknown. Looking back, we may see how we might have acted differently. However, no one 'intentionally' misses the signs of mental illness or addiction. Don't blame yourself for what you didn't know. Remember, we do the best with what we know at the time. Focus on what supports you can provide moving forward.

As parents, we need support as well so that we can be strong and resilient. You don't have to do this alone. We are here for you.

4 Self-Care - make yourself a priority

Make your own physical and emotional health a priority. Ensure you eat well, have adequate sleep and exercise regularly. Take time to do what helps you relax. This is different for everyone. It may be a walk in nature or simply a quiet moment with a cup of coffee or writing in a daily journal. Taking care of your own basic needs will help you sustain your energy and cope with parenting demands. Identify what is important to you and where you can compromise. Plan a time out when stress strikes. Walk the dog, take a bath, listen to soothing music, and if regular exercise is effective at relieving your stress, schedule your exercise routine as if it were a doctor's appointment, making it a non-negotiable part of your day.

we've been there,
we get it
and we can help



5 Self-Compassion

Be as kind, compassionate, and understanding towards yourself as you would be towards a friend who is struggling. Acknowledge that you are struggling and that you need to take care of yourself. Resilience is achieved by allowing yourself time to pause, reflect, and re-energize.

6 Keep a record

Having clear, chronological records when you're working with service providers is very useful. Sometimes your notes can reveal emerging patterns in your child's behaviour, or symptoms you may not have previously noticed. Your journal also helps you keep track of medication changes and your child's response to them.

7 Seek professional help for yourself

Sometimes it is important to seek professional support for yourself to help you cope with difficult situations. This is not a sign of weakness, nor does it reduce your commitment to your child. It is a sign of strength, and an excellent behaviour to model. The better you cope, the stronger you'll be, both as an individual and as an advocate and caregiver for your child.

At times of stress we tend to isolate ourselves, which is not helpful. Our Helpline and Support Groups are a great way to connect to others who understand what it's like.

8 Be engaged

At times, it can feel frustrating or discouraging, but your continued engagement with your child's treatment team does make a difference. You know your child best, which means that you can provide valuable information to the professionals. The pieces of the puzzle you provide will help them build a clearer picture of your child's challenges. Be aware that age of consent is dependent on the individual's capacity to make decisions about their health and they have the right to keep their health information private. If your child does not want you to have access to their health information, you can still be involved. You can share information

with service providers, in person or in writing, remembering to be focused and succinct. Be aware that without your child's consent, professionals cannot respond to you directly and they may decide to disclose information you have provided to your child. You are well within your rights to be a strong, tenacious advocate for your child. At the same time, it's very important to remain calm, reasonable, and respectful when communicating with your child's treatment team.

9 Recovery is a journey and can take time

We often use the term 'baby-steps' when talking about recovery and it may be necessary to shift your expectations for the short term and possibly longer.

Remember, your child's challenges are only one part of their identity. Don't let it define who they are, you know that they are so much more than that.

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10 Disclosure

Mental health awareness has dramatically increased in our society. However, there is still significant stigma and knowing whom to tell and what to say can be a major stressor. Keep in mind that these are health challenges like any other. You can certainly benefit from speaking with someone supportive and non-judgmental who will respect your confidentiality. You may also feel a need to share this part of your life in order to have authentic personal relationships. It is important to respect your child's right to privacy, and so before you disclose their struggle in a more public way, please remember to seek their permission.

11 Avoid walking on eggshells

We can sometimes be afraid to talk to our child openly about what is happening and what they are experiencing. We hesitate to share our feelings and thoughts in fear of causing them harm. This inevitably creates stress as we pretend that everything is okay when it isn't, instead of communicating more naturally with our child. You might try to get a conversation started by just asking what you can do to help or if they want to talk. They may not respond right away, but you

might find that sometime later they'll be ready. It is common for children to feel guilty about causing so much stress in their family. Open discussions can be beneficial for everyone. Also, if you are worried, don't be afraid to ask your child if they are thinking about suicide or self-harm. Contrary to popular belief, this will not put the idea in their head unless it was already there. There is training available specific to having this kind of safety conversation with your child.

12 Be patient with yourself


It takes time. It's very natural to feel a sense of loss and grief when you are struggling. It's also very normal to be in denial or to feel angry. As you gain a greater understanding of your child's challenges, you will develop new feelings of acceptance and empathy, which will give you comfort and strength. Remind yourself that recovery is possible, and while things may not be the same, they can still be very meaningful. Celebrate the small successes as they occur!

13 It's a family affair

When one member of the family is not well, it affects everyone. Let your family know that you want to know if they're having difficulties, and that you will listen in a non-judgmental fashion. Stress in families affects each family member differently, and it's important that you reach out to each other and try to openly discuss your feelings. As family members help each other, they combat their sense of isolation and develop a sense of shared purpose. Some families struggle more than others with this process and find that family counselling can be very helpful.

14 Carpe diem —seize the day!

Most people who are coping with a mental health challenge will have good days and bad days. Consider 'seizing the day' and making the best of the good days, for they do happen. When you can, do small things that create positive memories for you and your child. On those less than perfect days, it will help you both to have loving memories to share. And remember: look for humour wherever and whenever you can, because laughter does have wonderful healing powers.

A grayscale image of a hand holding a smartphone. The phone's screen is dark, and the text 'helping parents of children facing mental health challenges find their way forward' is overlaid on it in yellow and cyan colors.

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children facing mental
health challenges
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This information is offered from a Family Peer Support perspective - PLEO's collective family experience over the past twenty years and collaboration with health, education and social service providers. *It is not meant as a substitute for medical advice.*

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