



Stepfamilies Tip Sheet: Self Care



Why self care?

Self care is easy to overlook. When you're busy with kids or stressed with work, nice things for yourself can be the first thing to go. But if you aren't looking after yourself, if you feel overloaded, or are lacking sleep, it can be very hard to manage strong feelings and challenges.

Your resilience takes a dip when you aren't eating well or taking time for you, so self care is key when facing the challenges being a step-family can bring.

Practical tips

Start simple: If you can carve out even 20 minutes downtime to read a book or magazine, draw, work in the garden, lie on the couch and rest, or do something else that replenishes you most days, you will notice a difference.

Stay active

Fitting in some exercise like a brisk walk to the shops or the park every day will make you feel noticeably better. As adults, we should aim for 30 minutes vigorous exercise a day – so even 15 minutes of fast walking twice a day will make a difference. If you like going to the gym or swimming pool, great! But if you don't, just try to move more. Every bit helps, and self care is doing lots of little things consistently, not big things only once.



Stay connected

Think about building a support network. It's important to be able to discuss (with friends, other parents or a professional counsellor) what makes you feel stressed or angry, and how to best deal with it. Rediscover some old hobbies and interests if you can. It's not an indulgence to look after yourself, it is a vital foundation of good mental health.

Act early when tension is rising

People often become stressed or anxious because of their thoughts. If your child is misbehaving, you may find yourself thinking, "That's it – they're doing it again! I can't stand that!" This can escalate your stress levels and make it harder to handle. Catch yourself thinking this way and reframe calmly. Instead of seeing it as a problem, think of it in more helpful terms, like, "This is challenging, but I can deal with it calmly – we will get there."

Similarly, if you are thinking, "I can't stand going to that meeting at work", try to take a few breaths and think more moderately: "everyone has to go to meetings they don't like, it will be over soon." Try to monitor your stress levels and head off problems at work or home by showing empathy for what those around you are feeling. Don't try to control or solve everything, know your boundaries and be realistic about what you can do.

Managing in a stressful moment

Remind yourself that everyone has stressful times – it won't last forever. Focus on your breathing. Take deep breaths and relax your shoulders. This tells your brain "things are okay" and helps pull you out of fight or flight mode.

Try to take a break, ask for time to think about the issue, or excuse yourself for a moment to gather your thoughts. Not everything has to be dealt with immediately! You might go to the bathroom to splash some water on your face, or go outside for some fresh air, then continue managing the situation. Try to contain what's happening and slow things down – you will have more time to think about addressing the issue afterwards. Avoid knee jerk reactions or saying something you may later regret.

Resettling afterwards

Give yourself some time to settle and calm. It's natural to feel upset after stressful events. Use deep breathing and play some soothing music if necessary. Try having a quick shower or go for a walk. Distract yourself with your favourite show or by connecting with friends and family until you are ready to problem solve. Be kind to yourself and try to get back into your normal routines. They help us resettle when things get stressful.

If you need to seek support

Ask for it openly. Most people like to help others and may even be flattered! Be specific about what might help e.g. "If I had a couple of hours to myself without the kids on a Sunday afternoon, that would really help me cope better throughout the week." If you don't believe us, ask yourself, "What's the first thought I'd have if I learned someone I cared about had been having a hard time?" It's probably, "I wish I'd known", or "I wish I'd been able to help".

Some ideas for self care:

- Take a long hot shower or bath
- Get moving – walking, running swimming, dancing etc. A simple walk around the block will help your clear your mind
- Talking/venting with a partner or friend and then laughing about it
- A cup of tea and a good, funny TV show
- Play music or pump up the volume on your playlist
- Travelling. If you can, book a holiday or some time out so you have something to look forward to
- Read a good book or study/google things that are not work-related
- Cooking or baking
- Gardening – get into the dirt, it is cleansing!
- Mindfulness, yoga or meditation
- Catching up with friends
- Get creative – paint, draw, sculpt
- Spend some time on the beach if possible; the energy of the waves lifts you

It's easy to feel like you don't deserve to do things for yourself, or that your job as a parent is to sacrifice yourself for your children. But remember, you're a person too. The idea of self-love can be helpful here. When you love someone, you want to look after them. It's not indulgent or narcissistic to do nice things for yourself. It helps make you a better person, and a better parent.

Tip: Self care means self-love! When you love someone you want to do things for them. So when you love yourself, you want to do things for yourself.

Learning from experience

It's important to show empathy for yourself as you cope with the ups and downs of life. Work stress, family problems, challenging children and chronic health issues can be incredibly draining, and almost all of us feel like we are losing it at some point.

However it's important not to be too hard on yourself if you've done something you regret, but rather to seek the extra support or learn the skills you need. You definitely don't have to just keep trying to cope on your own. If you need someone to talk to immediately, there are some great helplines with trained people available 24/7.

Lifeline: 131 114

Beyond Blue: 1300 22 4636

Mensline: 1300 789 978

WIRE (Women's Information and Referral Exchange Inc): 1300 134 130

Safe Steps: 1800 0151 88

Parentline: 1300 301 1300

For longer term assistance call
Drummond Street Services:
[03] 9663 6733

