

# ≡ Overwhelm? ≡

Self-care for parents: how do you help yourself and how do you know when you need help? asks **Julia Ross**

**A**S PARENTS WE WANT TO BE the very best for our children. You may have looked back on your own childhood and promised yourself you will do better. You may have

done the research and planned ahead. But what happens when, despite your best intentions, you feel like you're failing? When you feel overwhelmed? Desperate? Useless?

It's 7am; you've been up all night with your two-year-old. You need to get out of the house quickly, but your daughter refuses to sit down for breakfast. Then she throws her food on the floor. She doesn't want to get dressed.

Each effort to hurry her along, provokes even wilder toddler show(wo)manship. You know what you need, right now, is to be calm. But all you actually want to do is scream, and cry – and maybe run away.

Everyone has moments like these, but if they are happening more than you'd like, or it feels out of control, it's time to turn your focus inwards.

Self-care is a vital skill for all parents. As much as you want to put your child first, the lynchpin to their well-being and happiness, is being cared for by someone who is well and happy themselves.

So how do you work out what you need, when you need it? And how do you know when to ask for help?

## YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT

First of all, consider how your physical state is influencing your mental wellbeing.

You may well be sleep deprived; but is the food you're eating – or not eating – making everything feel worse than it is?

Busy parents often skip meals, or to load up on sugar and caffeine to keep them going.

The body responds to sustained hunger by releasing the stress hormone, cortisol, which also restricts the release of feel-good chemical, serotonin. People who don't eat breakfast are almost twice as likely to suffer from depression.

**“As babies we need constant closeness, nurture and soothing to help our brains develop. If you didn't receive this, big feelings will continue to overpower you”**

Excessive caffeine consumption offers a short term high, but can leave you tired, bad-tempered and miserable. The same is true for sugary drinks and snacks.

Taking control of your own diet will not only help you, but will also empower you to encourage your child to eat healthily too.

Food rich in vitamin B and folic acid like bananas, avocado, vegetables and baked potatoes, will help your body to produce more serotonin. Healthy fats like coconut oil are also a great serotonin-enhancer. As well as regulating your moods, serotonin also improves the quality of your sleep.

Omega-3 fatty acid, Docosahexaenoic acid (DHA), is crucial to keeping you calm under stress, but it's something most people aren't getting enough of. As well as oily fish and egg, plant-based foods like cold-pressed linseed oil, flaxseed oil and certain types of algae, are all rich in DHA. Drinking and smoking, on the other hand, will deplete your supplies of it.

Protein foods, such as tofu, pulses, and cheese, work alongside essential >





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> vitamins and minerals to form dopamine, which keeps you motivated. Protein also keeps up your energy levels, so snacks rich in it, like nuts, mixed seeds or homemade hummus are a great way to boost you and your child throughout the day.

Conversely, eating “good” carbs, like potatoes, brown rice and wholemeal pasta for your evening meal, will help you get a good night’s sleep.

When you are running around after your children, it’s easy to forget to drink water, but dehydration saps your energy and plays havoc with your mood. Drinking two litres of water through the day is recommended. Caffeine and sugary drinks will dehydrate you, so, once again, it’s a good idea to limit your intake. You can also drink more water to counteract their effects.

If you struggle to maintain a balanced diet, vitamin supplements can help.

According to some studies, supplements containing B6 and B12 can actually cure depression, in some cases. As we get older, our bodies are also less effective at absorbing vitamins, which makes supplements even more beneficial.

### TAKING TIME FOR YOU, AND MAKING IT COUNT

Even though you love being with your children, you may need regular breaks away from them to manage your stress and help you appreciate your time together. If you are feeling worn out and emotionally dysregulated, this is especially important.

Spending time with other adults – and the right adults – is essential to your emotional

health. Being with someone you love releases opioids in the brain, and a physically affectionate relationship only heightens these effects.

Another aspect of self-care is recognising and making time for people who soothe and heal you; people who exude positive energy; who ask how you are and listen to your answer. Doing this for yourself, will help you to be someone who can soothe and heal others, in return.

In short, an evening or a lunchbreak with your partner or a close friend can boost your health and help you feel capable. Time alone is also a precious commodity you need to make the most of. Cardio workouts, like running, give you a natural high by

### FEELING OVERWHELMED?

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releasing endorphins. Even a brisk walk in the sunshine can help to boost your cardiovascular system; as well as stocking up your vitamin D, another vital ingredient to your sense of well being.

If you really embrace them, activities like yoga and meditation will not only help you relax, but also build greater mindfulness, which you can take with you, through the stresses of daily life. Research has shown yoga works better for some people than anti-anxiety medication. With the abundance of online classes available, it is also something you can do for free at home, in the evenings or during naptime.

Massage has been proven to dramatically lower cortisol levels, while boosting serotonin and dopamine. If you don’t have the time and money to go to a professional masseuse, why not ask a friend or partner to give it a try?

A course of acupuncture is also worth considering, if you are going through a tough time. Studies are increasingly recognising its effectiveness at tackling anxiety and depression – particularly when used in tandem with counselling.

### WHEN YOU CAN’T DO IT ALONE

Sometimes the issues are too big for you to handle alone. It is often hard to step outside yourself and recognise you need help. Sometimes it is even harder to ask for that help.

At least One in 10 mothers suffer from postnatal depression, and sometimes symptoms only appear several months after your child is born. Studies have shown it can also affect fathers – who may find it harder to recognise and acknowledge something seen as a “women’s problem” is happening to them. You may have deep-rooted anxiety, and at the same time feel numb and detached from your child. >



## “It is your natural instinct to shelve your own feelings and focus on your child, but children feed off their carers’ emotional energy”

> You may experience guilt that you are not 'coping', which only makes it harder to ask for help.

Depression, of any kind, can take hold of you without warning. It may be triggered by a trauma or change in circumstances, like the death of a loved one, or becoming a single parent. Sometimes it just happens – even when things are great. As a parent, it is your natural instinct to shelve your own feelings and focus on your child, but children feed off their carers’ emotional energy, picking up indiscriminately on their warmth, their calm, their sense of fun, or on their anger, fear and despair. It is essential, for your sake and theirs, that you acknowledge the way you are feeling and get outside help.

If you are not ready to talk to a doctor or counsellor, talk to someone you trust. If you don't feel ready to do this, an anonymous helpline like Samaritans could be your first port of call. Pandas Foundation and The Association for

Postnatal Illness run helplines specifically there to help postnatal depression sufferers.

It is important to understand that many people are feeling the way you do now (even if they are good at hiding it!) and many more have felt this way and come out the other side. Find advice on dealing with PND holistically on [page 64](#).

### WHEN YOU CAN'T ESCAPE THE PAST

Being a parent can bring back painful memories from your own childhood. Sometimes they are not memories you can access, because you were too young to process what was happening to you at the time. Instead, you are left with a visceral reaction you don't understand. When you hear your child crying, you may find it unbearable, because you were left to cry yourself. You relive those same feelings of helplessness and despair, and because you don't understand them, you can't own them.

When we are born, we need constant closeness, nurture and soothing to help our immature brains to develop, and later manage powerful emotions like anger or sadness or fear. If you did not receive the right care when you were a child, the same big feelings which cause a toddler to have a meltdown in a shopping centre will continue to overpower you. When you become a parent yourself, you are then tasked, not only with managing your own emotions, but with teaching your children to deal with theirs. You want to gently guide your child through a red mist moment, but you feel hysterical yourself. You want to help your child to feel safe, but you are crippled by your own anxiety. No matter how old you are, it is never too late to learn to master your feelings, but you may not be able to do it alone.

Sometimes the only way to leave your childhood behind is to face it head-on through professional counselling. Your partner, family and friends may all be supportive, but none of these relationships should be dominated by your needs alone.

A counsellor or therapist is there to focus on you. Working out your needs with them, will not only change the way you are feeling, but will empower you to be a warm and giving presence in the lives of those you love.

As a parent, your happiness is entwined with your child's. As much as you need to make sacrifices, it is essential you consider your own needs too. The love you feel for your children can even be the thing which finally inspires you to truly nurture yourself and to take ownership of your past and your present.

### MORE INSPIRATION

**GET SUPPORT** Visit [samaritans.org](http://samaritans.org) or [pandasfoundation.org.uk](http://pandasfoundation.org.uk)  
**READ** Positive tips at [mothersformothers.co.uk](http://mothersformothers.co.uk)

*Julia is a freelance writer and editor, living in Sheffield with her partner and two-year-old daughter. "We recently left London to spend more time together as a family, explore the great outdoors and work less."*

## WHAT YOU CAN DO RIGHT NOW

### 5 STRATEGIES TO COPE WITH OVERWHELM

#### 1 ASK FOR HELP

Tell someone you trust that you feel overwhelmed. Often this will open up more honest communication and help shift the overwhelm.

**2 CRY** Let yourself shed the tears that you're holding in. Use music or memories if you need a catalyst. Let go of trying to hold everything together. Release yourself.

**3 BREATHE** Put your hands on your belly. Breathe in deeply so that your

palms move outwards. Let the breath out slowly through your mouth. Take 10 deep breaths.

**4 GET OUTSIDE** Even if it's just to sit outside the house for a moment, walk around the block or swing on the swings for five minutes, a pause in the fresh air does wonders for our wellbeing.

**5 DECLUTTER** Feeling anxious or angry? Use that energy. Set a timer for fifteen minutes and clear out a drawer or cupboard. Recycle, regift, move stuff on that you no longer need.

