



## Can I Also Take Care of Myself?

During all the concerns and crises that can arise in parenting a loved one struggling with substance use, taking care of yourself can get lost. Self-care, however, is probably better described as “caring about yourself”; having an attitude of generosity, kindness, and patience toward yourself. This topic focuses on the importance of self-care and self-compassion as part of helping others.

### Messages you may have heard or told yourself:

- I can only be happy when my child goes to rehab and stops using \_\_\_\_\_.
- I need to focus on all my other responsibilities first ...then me.
- I don't deserve time to myself.
- Being a responsible parent means putting myself last.
- I'm only as happy as my least happy child.

### Important Points:

- Having a child struggling with substance use *is stressful*, and can wear you down, test your patience, pull you off balance, and undermine your resilience.
- Taking care of yourself is a critically important and part of helping effectively.
- As they say on planes: “secure your own oxygen mask first before you help someone else”; you need ‘oxygen’ for yourself to sustain you as you help your child.
- It is natural to feel afraid, angry, betrayed, ashamed, and other painful emotions when witnessing your child's risky behaviors. Two points are important about these feelings: 1) they are normal and 2) you weren't born knowing how to deal with this situation.
- Many parents struggle with shame (negative judgements about themselves). They worry that somehow this is their fault, if only they had done things differently, etc. Identifying these inner voices of shame can help you keep an eye on its effects which may include a desire to isolate, blame yourself, and try to be perfect in order to make the problem go away.
- Finding compassion for yourself, while not easy, involves noticing your pain, practicing self-kindness, and recognizing that pain and struggle is a part of life experienced by all.

### Putting self-care on your radar allows for other possibilities:

- Allows you to broaden the focus on yourself and attend to areas of your life that are important to you and your well-being.
- Highlights the importance of learning strategies to help you manage your emotions.
- Keeps the light on the importance of social support and reducing isolation.
- Gives you permission to practice self-compassion in the face of self-judgments that can leave you feeling exposed and vulnerable.

If your child is using substances or engaging in risky behavior, it is normal to have a variety of emotions (e.g., fear, anger, guilt or frustration), and to feel like they are taking up all your time and energy. As you understandably focus on trying to help your child, taking care of yourself may fall to the bottom of the list.

While it's normal to think you'll feel better once your child is DOING better, the reality is that by not taking care of yourself, you're at risk for being reactive, anxious and easily frustrated just at the time when your family needs you to be strong, calm and optimistic.

When there's a fire, it can feel counterintuitive not to spray the flames constantly, but if you run out of water because you're not taking care of yourself, everyone loses. To be an effective helper, you need to channel some of the time and energy you spend WORRYING about your child back into yourself; something called "self-care". If you are getting enough sleep, eating well and finding some joy and comfort in OTHER areas of your life, you'll be better equipped to manage the pain and upset you are feeling in relation to your child who is struggling.

It's also important to stay healthy so that you can stay connected to the OTHER members of your family who might not be struggling with a drug or alcohol problem. Your partner, other children, parents: they all need you to take care of yourself so that the whole family system doesn't get out of balance. Changing a substance use problem can take a while and the better shape you are in, the better you will be able to think, plan, act, and troubleshoot effectively. Remember: "It's a marathon, not a sprint."

Carving out some time for your own self-care is CRUCIALLY important but it can be SURPRISINGLY difficult to do. It takes thought, planning, support and follow through. But you can do it! The following exercise is designed to help you identify and check in with areas of your life that are important to you. The purpose of the exercise is not to spend time reflecting on all the things going wrong with your life, but to help you identify specific things you can do that will help you bring back some balance to your life.

### **Group Activity:**

Think about the following categories: **parenting, work, hobbies, marriage/partner, spirituality, friendships, socializing, community involvement, health, caregiving, personal growth, adventure, fun, education, stability, creativity, sex life, finances.**

Picking the most important areas for you, think about the actions...the time, energy, focus, and ...that you are putting towards that area of your life right now.

- For example: Health. Are you exercising? Eating reasonably? Taking prescribed medication? Practicing moderation or abstinence from substances? Making and keeping healthcare appointments?

### **Putting It into Action!**

What area could you address this week that would be consistent with you improving your self-care? What could be one small step to take to bring your actions in alignment with fuller living in this area? What barriers could get in the way? How could you navigate around the barrier?