



## Maintaining Self-Awareness when your Child is Struggling

As a parent, you've most likely often taken on the role of a helper. You've likely helped your child learn how to brush their teeth, make their bed, and say "please" and "thank you". But as your child grows into a young adult, the types of things that you help them with become more challenging. Among the most difficult is the experience of supporting a child through substance use.

Helping your child through this can take a toll on your emotions, your energy, and your capacity to get through each day. Not to mention, the shame and guilt you may feel from the stigma surrounding substance use - it can all feel like a lot to navigate. That's why, alongside everything you do for your child, it is vital for you to take care of yourself as well. Tuning in to your reactions, experiences, and emotions as a parent can make you a better helper for your child - and it helps ensure that you won't burn out in the process.

### What Exactly is Self-Awareness?

Staying connected with a child while they struggle with substance use is incredibly hard. One major reason for this is the amount of pain and stress *you* are most likely experiencing. It is important to acknowledge that - so take a breath, and just acknowledge it.

When we move through change it is easy to push complicated feelings aside and say, "I'll get to myself later." But, not acknowledging what is difficult and painful for you is like driving and refusing to look at the gas gauge. It's all fine until it's not.

There will come a point when you run out of gas and, if you haven't planned for it, this can feel like a disaster! But, if you've been keeping an eye on your own gas gauge, you can be ready to fill the tank when needed so that you can continue on the long haul. Self-awareness is the process of noticing your personal gas gauge and taking time to fill up the tank.

### Where to Start:

At the most basic level, self-awareness involves *noticing*. When working on it, your primary job is to tune in to what's happening internally for you. This may include becoming aware of stressful feelings that you have been setting aside, but it can also involve getting in touch with positive and loving feelings.

Here are some things that might come up for you:

- Pain / anxiety / physical sensations of stress
- Fatigue or tiredness
- A sense of tension or unease
- Self-shame or self-blame

- Guilt or frustration with your own parenting

And at the same time, you may also experience:

- Feelings of caring and love towards your child
- Appreciation of their positive attributes
- A desire for positive communication with them
- Longing for the type of relationship you might have had with them in the past

### Practicing Self-Awareness: It's a Process!

Let's take a moment to practice this. Take a breath, and check in with your personal 'gas gauge'.

Start to think about (or write down) five things that feel hard for you right now. They could be things like "I get so mad when they speak rudely to me" or "I feel numb a lot of the time."

Next, take a second to think about how hard these things are for you on a scale from 1-5. For each item, think to yourself "Is this bothersome?" (1 on the scale), or "Is this incredibly painful?" (5 on the scale).

Notice what it feels like to allow yourself to do this. Does it feel like a relief? Have you ever noticed these things before? Where else could you find time to validate the struggles in your daily life?

The goal here is simply to acknowledge yourself and where you are at right now. It is important that you don't try to "fix" these difficult things, which may be your first instinct! Instead, give yourself permission to simply take stock of your pain and difficulty. **The pain is there because the process of helping your child matters to you a tremendous amount.** Allowing yourself to acknowledge that is a big part of refilling your tank and returning to the road you want to drive on.

As with anything else involved in parenting, self-awareness takes a lot of practice. And this practice can be really hard! But as you work on your self-awareness over time, the process of getting in touch with, experiencing, and balancing your feelings will start to get easier. Just as you learn to notice your child's needs and desires, you can learn (or re-learn) to tune in to and respond to your own.

Material adapted from: <https://www.hellocherish.com/post/maintaining-self-awareness-when-your-child-is-struggling>

Note: This article (updated 2/11/21) appeared in [Cherish Parenting](#). It was Center for Motivation and Change's third article in a series on navigating teen substance use as a parent, co-authored by Dr. Carrie Wilkens and Dr. Jarell Myers.