

Parental Stressors: Having a Child with Mental Health Struggles

Being a parent is stressful and when your child struggles with mental health, it can feel overwhelming. There may be times as parents where we are so focused on helping our children, we do not see how we are being impacted and our stress levels increase due to this. Based on parent feedback and what we see from parents as clinicians, below are some common stressors that parents share:

- Instability of having a child with mental health struggles: the behaviors of your child can and do seem at times unpredictable. Parents have shared that it is difficult to cope and manage their own emotions when this occurs.
- Feeling helpless: Parents have shared how they feel little or no control over their children's symptoms. This can lead to the feeling of feeling as though no matter what you do, your child is still struggling.
- Feeling isolated from your child: a common symptom of mental health diagnoses such as depression and anxiety is isolation and withdrawal. Hence, your child may be experiencing this symptom and isolating from you. When you, as a parent, feel as though your child is isolating from you, in turn, you may feel isolated from being able to help them.
- Managing the family as a whole: in addition to trying to help your child who is struggling and managing yourself, you may also feel the stress of managing the entire family unit.

Although there are stressors that parents experience, there are ways to aid in decreasing these stressors and not have it seem as overwhelming.

- First and foremost: TAKE CARE OF YOU! This is usually the very last thing we do as parents because we forget ourselves with all the stressors we have in daily life. However, if you are not able to take care of yourself, you will not be able to be present for anyone else and take care of them.
- Have collaborative conversations with your child: Try not to "fix"; just listen and validate. If your child can come and share anything with you, let them have the floor and share their emotions, feelings, and thoughts with you. Validate them by saying, "I hear you; that must be hard for you; I am sorry that you are experiencing this".
- Offer support and only support: Trying or attempting to "fix" what is happening can lead to your child not wanting to share things or talk with you. Instead, offer support by saying "I am here if you need to talk" or "Is there anything I can do to help you in this moment?" Approaching the conversation this way shows your child you are willing to hear and support them.
- Seek support for yourself: Your mental health is just as important as your child's. Having someone to talk to and give additional support can aid in decreasing the stressors. Additionally, support groups can provide connection to other parents and families who are going through the same stressors.

Adapted from Mazur. (2017, November 11). What's So Hard About Parenting Children With Mental Illness? Psychology Today.
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/de-stressing-disability/201711/whats-so-hard-about-parenting-children-mental-illness>

