



THE GREATEST GIFT

...You Can Give Your Child is to Care for Yourself

When you became a parent, you began living for someone else. Your drive to protect this precious gift sometimes overrides your desire to meet your own needs. But if your goal is to build a happy child who is prepared to thrive through good times and bad, you must care for yourself with the same degree of commitment you are willing to invest in the care of your child.

Parents are sometimes resistant to taking care of themselves. Why? Maybe it is because we devote every last drop of energy to making sure our children's needs are met. It seems like a small sacrifice to ignore our "selfish" needs. This is especially true for those of us who hold the very real but often unspoken fear that, because we work so hard, we aren't giving our children the time we think "good" parents should offer.

As military families, we sometimes feel as though we are already asking for so much sacrifice from our children (e.g., dealing with moves and multiple deployments) that we have to devote all of our time and efforts to pleasing them.

Keep in mind that your parenting goal is not just to raise a happy, healthy child; it is to raise a person who is prepared to be a happy, healthy adult. We as parents are role models of what adults are supposed to look like. We are the models who demonstrate healthy coping strategies and make it safe to admit personal limitations. When we address our problems, we refuse to be shamed by our imperfections. When we reach our limits and reach out to others, we model that strong people seek support and guidance.

Children want their parents to be okay. They feel calmer and more confident when they see that we are taking care of ourselves. Everyone benefits when parents take care of themselves because children of unhappy or stressed parents often blame themselves as being responsible!

You need to maintain your strength so you can continue to care for others. Burnout is simply not an option. Maintaining your interests, addressing your needs (including having pleasure!), and relieving your stress with healthy coping strategies are precisely what give you the energy to give to others.

The greatest gift you can give your child is to live a balanced life and to demonstrate that when life inevitably offers us challenges, we take active steps to get back on track.

Caring for yourself is not selfish – it is a selfless and strategic act of good parenting.

● ALLOWING YOURSELF TO HAVE PLEASURE

> Treat Yourself

- Often times we are too busy spending time buying things for our children and forget to allow ourselves to indulge in ourselves once in a while. Buy yourself a little something that you don't have to share. Use layaway where available to save over time instead of breaking the bank. Don't forget, you are worth it!



> **Make Instant Vacations for Yourself**

- Get away from it all. Work on a hobby. Read a book. Go out with friends. It will restore your energy.

● **DON'T TAKE IT ALL ON YOURSELF**

> **Teamwork**

- Chores are a great way to teach children how to be responsible adults. Children feel pride from being able to help – so give them the chance to do so regularly and praise them for their contribution.
 - > Young children can be taught the habit of cleaning up after themselves or putting laundry in a basket. Some children may enjoy helping prepare their family's dinner. Try asking one child to clean off the table, another to help load the dishwasher and a third to help put things away. You'll get much needed help and they'll learn that running a home takes work and a shared commitment.
- Your partner, whether close by or deployed, can also help you avoid becoming burnt out. Divide tasks with your partner as well. Make a list of things that need to be done and then choose which chores each of you would be willing to take on.



> **Saying No**

- Prioritizing what is the most important to you will help you identify what you can say no to.
- Reevaluate your schedule to make sure you aren't feeling tired and overwhelmed. If you are, choose which activity may be cut, even temporarily. This process helps your children realize the importance of checking in with oneself and recognizing one's limits. By watching you they learn how to prioritize things in their own lives.
- Try not to overcommit yourself. It's easy to do so when you are used to keeping busy or are trying to escape the feelings of missing your service member.

● **MAINTAINING YOUR ADULT RELATIONSHIPS**

> **Children are most secure when they see their parents happy. Invest in your relationship with your spouse or partner. Remember you are modeling how to be a healthy ADULT.**

- Nurture your relationship and keep lines of communication and understanding open. You were a couple before you had children and will be a couple after your children are grown.
- Make the time and space to communicate with as few distractions as possible (e.g., not when your children are crying).
- Make a point of checking in and sharing feelings with each other every day. Be willing to state your own needs and to compromise as well.
- Schedule a babysitter and spend fun or romantic time together without the kids.
- Don't forget about friendships – you need them too!
- If you are single, then look for a loving supportive relationship. You deserve it and your children deserve to see you happy.

MANAGING STRESS

Everybody has stress. Some of the easiest and fastest ways to deal with it are also harmful to our bodies and our minds. Our children are watching us, and when we manage stress in healthy ways, they learn not to turn to those dangerous quick fixes (e.g., drugs and alcohol).

People who manage stress in healthy ways are able to:

1. Consider a problem and determine if it is a full-blown crisis that deserves every ounce of our emergency response system or if it just feels awful but is not really dangerous.
2. Manage Problems.
3. Build Strong and Healthy Bodies.
4. Manage Emotions.
5. Learn Valuable Lessons by Serving Others.

1. CONSIDER YOUR PROBLEM: IS IT A REAL TIGER OR PAPER TIGER?

- We are designed to escape tigers. Our stress reaction prepares us to flee. If we don't consider whether something that feels like an emergency can really harm us (a real tiger), we might waste all of our energy "fleeing" from something that can never really hurt us (a paper tiger).
- Sometimes it is really hard to stay calm because things constantly feel like emergencies when we are stressed. If you often feel anxious, uncomfortable, or worried, it may be worth getting counseling on how to think through problems so you can separate real from paper tigers.

2. MANAGE YOUR PROBLEM

- Sometimes problems feel overwhelming and you cannot imagine taking them on. A great trick is to learn to divide even the largest problems into small pieces. Make a list. Create a timeline. When you conquer even a small portion of a problem, suddenly you may feel less overwhelmed and gain the confidence to take on the next step.
- One of the best ways of managing a stressful situation is to avoid it altogether.
 - > Think about what stresses you out. Is it certain people? Certain places? Things? The truth is that you have to deal with a lot. But you may be able to avoid some really stressful things if you just think it through in advance.
 - > Do you see an annoying neighbor on the corner? Walk the other way.
- Conserve your energy. You can't fix everything. Why waste energy on something you have absolutely no control over? Let it go. Save your efforts for the things you can change.

3. BUILD STRONG AND HEALTHY BODIES

People manage stress much better when they exercise, know when and how to relax, sleep well, and eat well.

- **Taking Care of Your Body - Exercise:** Taking care of your body will not only lower your stress but also give you more energy and help you feel better about yourself. Exercise is proven to lower stress, to decrease anxiety and depression, and to increase your ability to focus.
 - > When possible, exercise outside; the change of scenery and fresh air can be very helpful.
 - > Ride a bike or take a walk; aim for at least 20 minutes a day.



- **Learn to Relax your Body and Mind:** Schedule relaxation time for yourself– when your kids are asleep, at their friends' houses after school or for a sleepover.
 - > Schedule a time to sleep in and stick to it! If you have an infant or very young child who takes naps, sleep when they nap as much as possible.
 - > Schedule a babysitter if you have to in order to make sure you get that alone time for yourself at least once a month.
 - > Deep breathing, yoga or meditation are great ways to get back in touch with yourself and actually change your body into a relaxed state.
 - > Go to your library or bookstore and pick up a book or DVD that you can totally lose yourself in.
 - > Take a warm, long bath or shower to relieve some stress and relax your muscles.
 - > Imagine you are some place peaceful and relaxing.
- **Sleep Well:** Try to go to bed the same time every night – establishing a sleep schedule for your children will help you stick to your own.
 - > Use your bed only for sleeping. Don't worry in bed. Instead, worry in a chair, let out all of your feelings, and then go to bed. That way, your bed will become the safe calm place you need to be able to fall asleep. As long as your bed is a place where you worry, you will have trouble falling asleep and will toss and turn through the night.
- **Eat Well:** Healthy nutrition makes a big difference in how you deal with stress and your overall health.
 - > Aim to eat a good breakfast, more fruits and vegetables, and fewer greasy meals or snacks.
 - > Drink more water in place of sodas and sugary drinks.
 - > Eat smaller portions throughout the day instead of skipping meals.



4. MANAGE YOUR EMOTIONS

Let yourself really work through your emotions. Don't bottle them up inside.

- Sometimes you need to just get away from it all. During those times, take instant vacations.
- Work on a hobby or take a walk.
- If you have saved something that is encouraging to read, find it and re-read it as many times as you want/need (e.g., a quote or a letter or card from someone special).
- Talk to your partner, friends, family member, or helping professional about your worries.
- Write about your feelings or keep a regular journal.

- Pray or meditate to gain strength.
- Let yourself cry and don't be afraid of laughing.
- Express yourself through art, music, dance, creative writing, poetry or rap.

5. LEARN VALUABLE LESSONS BY SERVING OTHERS

- Sometimes one of the best ways of solving your own problems is by serving others. It helps put things in perspective. Also, we all feel better when we receive appreciation.
- Volunteer to help a family or friend who needs assistance. Or volunteer for a good cause in your community individually or with your friends/family.

● KNOWING WHEN YOU HAVE REACHED YOUR LIMITS

- > **Every parent gets overwhelmed sometimes.** The challenge is to know when to step away so that you don't say or do something you will regret. Don't even try to make decisions when you are feeling overwhelmed. You teach your children a very valuable lesson when you model for them how you are giving yourself time and space. Just make sure your child is in a safe place or with another trusted adult, and then give yourself what you need. Make sure they understand how thoughtful you are being. They will learn from your example.
 - *"Right now I can't even give you an answer. I need some time to clear my heads and then I'll get back to you."*
 - *"I'm feeling really angry with you right now. You don't want me to think of consequence when I'm feeling this frustrated. Let me take some time to calm down and we will discuss this in the morning."*
- > **Remember that there is no better time** to model healthy coping strategies than when your children see you are stressed.
 - *"Right now I am feeling overwhelmed, I am going for a run. That always clears my head."*
 - *"I could really use some advice. I am going to call Aunt Beth."*
 - *"After today, I need to relax. I'm taking a bath."*
 - *"I need a vacation. I am going to escape into a book right now!"*
- > **Above all, model** for them that strong people turn to others for support when they have too much to handle. Asking for help is a strength that we all too often think of as a weakness. Show them that you are not afraid or ashamed to ask for help and that you think that your well-being is worth investing in.

Caring for yourself is a selfless and strategic act of good parenting that is critical to your personal and family's well-being. When parents take care of themselves, their children tend to be happier, more secure and better prepared for handling stress in their own lives.

SOURCES:

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Kids Health from Nemours (2011) How Becoming Parents Can Affect Your Relationships (http://kidshealth.org/parent/positive/family/becoming_parents.html#)

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