

# Parent mental health and wellbeing

**As parents it can be common for us to put the needs of our family before our own, and hard to find time to prioritise your own self-care. Over time this can lead to feelings of overwhelm and burnout. Developing effective coping strategies to help manage your stress can have a significant positive impact for your mental health, and in turn for your family.**

Many parents and carers of autistic children and young adults, face physical, practical, and emotional challenges every day. These may include coordinating their child's appointments and advocating for their educational and emotional needs, helping their child avoid sensory overload, dealing with behaviours that challenge in public and at home, or managing difficulties with their child's eating or sleeping.

## Coping strategies

Coping mechanisms are strategies that people use to help deal with stresses, pain and natural events and changes that we experience in life. They are learned behavioural patterns used to help us to cope. There are helpful and unhelpful coping mechanisms.

## Healthy coping strategies

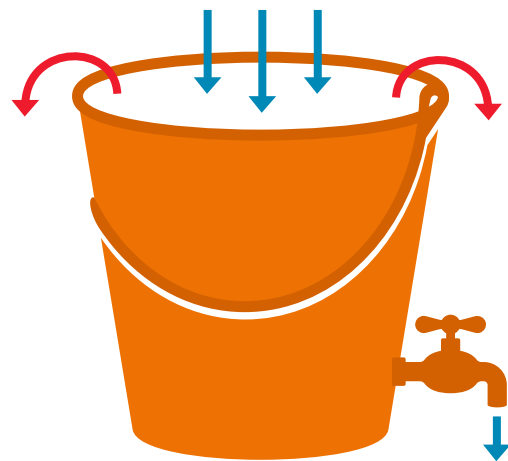
Healthy coping strategies help individuals to look after and prioritise their own self-care and wellbeing. Research has shown that caregivers who are able to engage their support systems and actively solve problems (including their own physical and mental health) experience much less stress.

## Unhealthy coping strategies

When we are feeling overwhelmed, it can be very easy to engage in unhelpful coping strategies as we may not have the energy or support networks to stop and think about what is helpful and

unhelpful. An example of an unhelpful coping strategy could be snapping at others or spending lots of time and effort researching online without guidance or filters. Online research can increase stress and feelings of overwhelm, particularly if finding lots of conflicting information.

## Our stress bucket



**Healthy coping strategies work like a tap to continually release stress and maintain a manageable level in the bucket. If these strategies don't exist and/or unhelpful coping mechanisms are adopted, the bucket fills up quickly and overflows.**

The stress bucket analogy was created to help people measure their stress tolerance. Our stress tolerance or size of our bucket is a product of our genes, personality and experience, and varies from person to person. The water in the analogy is a combination of all of the stresses in our lives. We cannot change the size of our bucket. However, we can develop coping strategies to keep our bucket from overflowing, that are like taps that allow water to drain from the bucket. Ideally, we want an open tap of healthy coping strategies that stops our bucket from overflowing. When the tap is closed, the bucket overflows and that is when it is more likely that unhelpful coping strategies can occur.

Parents can start by asking themselves:

- How full is my bucket?
- What can I change? What are some small but significant changes I could make to how I care for my mind and body?
- What can't I change and need to accept?
- What needs my urgent attention?
- Can anyone help me? Who can I call on in my support system when my child or myself needs help? Are there any caregiver tasks I can delegate to others to lower my overall stress?
- Do I have any unhelpful coping strategies? Are there any unhelpful or unhealthy ways of coping with stress that I need to remove from my routine?
- What coping strategies do I find helpful? For example having a peer group of other parents with similar experiences or finding a new regular public space where my family can feel safe and judgement free.
- How can I spot when my bucket is close to overflowing? What are my warning signs? Who can I share these warning signs with so they can help me spot them?
- Are there moments throughout the day where I can slow down, focus my thinking, and prevent fear or stress from taking over?
- What worries about my child's autism get in the way of my staying focused on the present?
- What community resources are there that can help me manage my stress, connect me to low-cost or free professional help, or provide support to my child?

Being mindful and paying attention to how you currently manage your stress, and taking time to consider and practise healthy, effective coping strategies can have a significant impact for both you and your child.

### When looking after your mental health start with simple changes

**Start with simple changes:** When feeling overwhelmed, sometimes starting with the simple changes can make the biggest difference.



This could include:

- Making sure you get enough sleep at night
- Exercising regularly
- Scheduling some time for yourself
- Connecting with others in your support system

If these tasks seem unmanageable, you can focus on even smaller changes such as:

- Slowing down through your daily routine
- Drinking more water
- Asking for help with simpler tasks

You might be surprised how much of your stress level is within your control, and you may find that prioritising caring for yourself has an immediate positive impact on your child as well.

**Try to focus on the present:** It's easy for any parent to become overly worried or anxious about how their child is developing, or what challenges they may face in the future. If you're feeling stressed, ask yourself whether you're focused on the reality-based current needs of your child or the future "What ifs." Asking, "What is my responsibility to my child and myself today?" can help you direct your focus back to what you can actually control.

**Find support outside of work:** For many parents, work is one of the few places where they can find respite from caring for their child. Ideally, caregivers should have time and spaces outside of work where they can focus on their emotional and physical health, their interests, and other important relationships. Sometimes fear of how their child will adjust to a new caregiver can keep parents from seeking out this support, but giving your child the opportunity to interact with other adults will benefit both you and your child.

**Use your village:** It's not surprising that research has shown that parents who access solid support systems are less likely to experience stress than those who don't or can't. It can feel daunting. Family members and close friends may struggle to understand how they can help, so consider giving them specific tasks when they offer. Caregivers don't have to be responsible for educating loved ones about autism — simply point them to resources that can help them learn more. Also, don't forget that disability organisations, places of worship, schools, and other community organisations may be important additions to your support system.

There are many different people and organisations you can turn to for support with your mental health. There is no right order or best practice for this, feeling comfortable should be your priority when seeking support.

You shouldn't ever feel bad or embarrassed about using or applying for services that are available to you, such as looking into your Local Offer or social services. Visiting our Early Years' website will provide parents with a myriad of useful links. These services are put in place to help people in unique situations, be it financially, physically or mentally.

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