

Putting our own oxygen mask on first – how can we begin to manage our own difficult feelings as parents or carers?

Putting our own oxygen mask on first and being kind to ourselves as parents isn't selfish – it's crucial

We are likely to be feeling that our close relationships are being put under varying amounts of strain at the moment, especially with those we are suddenly living so intensively alongside. As an adult in the family, our role may feel even more overwhelming than usual. We might be juggling the demands of family life alongside trying to work from home, or worrying about our job, our finances, or other vulnerable family members who we can't be with at the moment. This might be feeling really challenging.

So the first place we need to start is to recognize these difficult feelings for ourselves as adults. Being aware of our own needs and feelings and taking responsibility for them is good for us and helps us to be more able to look after others around us too.

In the middle of the hurly burly of family life, it is easy to go through an entire day without even noticing how we are feeling. It might feel odd even to be asked to do this! But our feelings carry really important information for us about our needs and it is important to pay attention to them.

If we can learn to check in with ourselves regularly, we might notice when we are feeling really tired, and this might remind us to prioritize an early night so that we can re-charge a little. We might notice that we are feeling anxious or worried. What we are aware of, we can learn to be in control of – we have choices about how we respond when we are aware of our how we are feeling. What we are not aware of is in control of us. The more aware we can be of our habits and patterns, the more possible it is to make changes which can help us to feel emotionally healthier.

It can be really helpful to try to notice where in your body your feeling is located at any given time...is it in your head? Your stomach? Your shoulders? What is the feeling like in your body – how might you describe it? Approach the feeling in your body with curiosity if you can, remembering that it is telling you something important about how to look after yourself.

What might help you in the moment to settle yourself? (e.g. taking a few deep breaths, going outside for a few moments, listening to some music, counting to 10 etc.)

Take some time to think about the things in your life which might have a settling effect on you.

Pick 5 of these, ideally 5 things which are quite different from each other (e.g. one energetic, one relaxing etc.). Try to remember these by listing them whilst pointing to each finger on one hand.

Experiment with these over the next few days, and try to notice whether certain activities work well for particular types of feeling.

There might be times when our feeling is so overwhelming that we have tried all 5 of our settling activities and we are aware of still feeling overwhelmed. That's when we might need to turn to our friends/family/a professional for support or help. Using the fingers of your other hand, make a list of people you might turn to for support when it has not felt possible to settle yourself.

What might this look like for you in this new way we are all having to be during this complicated time? Where are the tiny moments where it might be possible for you to top up? This isn't about being unrealistic, and expecting to be able to have a 2 -hour siesta each afternoon.... but rather about holding yourself in mind in the way that you try to with your children... and it might be something as small as opening a window, putting your head outside and taking several slow, deep breaths whilst noticing what that feels like as you fill your lungs with air and then let it out again. It might be recognizing that your needs being met is a crucial part of being the adult you would hope to be in your family – even if that means that your children watch an extra film now and then so that you have some time for yourself.

If we think about all the "giving out" we might need to do in a day, and imagine that we represent that with a jug full of water at the start of each day. Now start to think about all the various things you might have to do for others, and imagine pouring out the water into glasses with each thing you are doing for members of your household. This might be waking up children, getting breakfast organized, holding the boundaries for the routine you are trying to follow with everyone, making sure everyone is settled so that you can make the work meeting which is scheduled... You are going to run out of water pretty quickly if you don't top the jug up.

To finish, let's look at our top tips:

- Check in with yourself several times a day to notice how you are feeling
- Experiment with 5 things you can do to settle yourself
- Make a list of 5 people you could turn to for help
- Notice as many of the feelings you have as you can – beginning to work out how to manage these healthily for yourself. Some of them will be pleasant feelings – take time to enjoy these ones fully
- Remember – putting your own oxygen mask on first is not selfish – it's crucial

We wish you well – look after yourself 😊