

Finding Time to Take Care of Your Own Needs

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Parenting a toddler is incredibly hard work. You read to your child, play with your child, care for your child with all your heart. Yet it seems like every day, your child has a tantrum where he throws himself down, screaming in misery. You haven't gone to the bathroom alone in months, you haven't been in control of your sleep schedule, and you eat many of your meals cold because you're busy tending to your child. How can you continue to meet your own needs when you have a child to care for?

Giving Yourself Permission to Take Care of Your Needs

The first big step is to acknowledge that you have your own individual needs and that you have the right to sometimes be "selfish" and put your own needs first. Doing this will make you a happier, relaxed, more energized parent, which will lead to happier kids. It's like when you're on the airplane, and they say "if the oxygen mask drops down, first put on your own mask, and then assist small children."

Working with Your Child's Schedule and Needs

Sometimes you can fit in self care *while* caring for your child. What distracts your child enough that you can get a moment to yourself? Will they play happily in the bathtub while you sit on the floor nearby watching a movie on a laptop, or giving yourself a manicure? Can they play in a playground while you read a great book? Can you take them for a walk, while you listen to a podcast or call a friend? Can you take them to a swimming pool with floaties on and do water exercise while they splash around? Can you have a mostly uninterrupted lunch with a friend if you let your child watch a video while you do so?

Make a list of "5 minute self care ideas" – little things you can do for yourself when you have a moment.

Prioritizing

Is there something you would *love* to do, but just can't figure out how to make it happen? If so, start making a plan. First, it's good to figure out *why* you want it, and *what part* of it is most important to you (e.g. if you find yourself longing for a movie, figure out: is it getting caught up in a story that matters – if so, watch videos at home after you child is in bed. Is it being out in a theater that matters – if so, take your toddler to a daytime matinee of a kids' movie, or find a sitter so you can see a grown-up movie. Is it really just important to have two hours of uninterrupted time where you're responsible for nothing? Well, then the goal is to be child-free, and it doesn't matter much what you do!)

Contingency Planning

Once you've made a plan, then have a plan for contingencies: if X happens, what will I do? If Y happens, who will deal with it? Think: what's the worst thing that could happen? When would I know it was time to give up, and try again some other day? Have alternatives planned. Even if the plan fails, you will have accomplished one very important thing. You will have demonstrated that your own needs are important, and placed a priority on nurturing you. Celebrate that!! And have a plan to try again.

Asking for Help

Ask other people (friends, families, or paid professionals) to help out. In addition to asking for help with taking care of your child(ren), ask them to help you take care of yourself! Often parents will get their partner to take care of the child, or hire babysitters so they can do the things they *have* to do, like grocery shopping or doctor's appointments, but they feel guilty asking for help so they can do something "selfish" that they *want* to do, like meeting a friend for coffee, or just taking a morning off. It's OK to ask for help getting your desires met as well as your needs. And if the first person you ask says no, find someone else to ask!