EMOTIONAL HEALTH & WELLNESS

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introduction

BEING A PARENT CAN BE STRESSFUL FOR ANYONE. Being a parent with a psychiatric disability requires that you manage your psychiatric disability and your family at the same time. It can be difficult to be fully attentive to your children or your family’s needs when you’re experiencing the symptoms of your psychiatric disability. For that reason, you need to do all you can to take care of yourself physically and emotionally.

In the module on Physical Health and Well-Being, we talk about important benefits of taking care of your physical health. In this module on Emotional Health and Well-Being, we discuss how you can reduce your stress by taking care of your mental and emotional health. Working at staying healthy emotionally will reduce your stress; it might even improve your mental health so you have fewer symptoms or less of a need for emergency interventions. Furthermore, reducing your stress by maintaining good emotional health will allow you to be a more responsive parent and a healthier person overall.
One way to keep your stress level low involves staying on track with your mental health. First, if you take medications for your psychiatric disability, you should work with your mental health treatment providers to make sure you are comfortable with the medications you are taking. Your doctor should work with you to minimize any side effects. Finding the medications that help alleviate your symptoms but also have few side effects is often a difficult balancing act. The best way to deal with this issue is to find a doctor you trust and to learn to advocate for yourself. If you are using private insurance, you can call the behavioral health customer service number on the back of your insurance card to locate new doctors within the areas of expertise that are listed in your insurance company’s database. If you are using medical assistance, you can also call your customer service number, but you might have more limited choices. You can still advocate for what you need and why.

Research has shown that people are more apt to take their medications as prescribed if they have good health care relationships — meaning people in recovery openly share information with their doctors and therapists about their health beliefs and their experiences with their psychiatric disabilities.¹

Attending your appointments with your mental health professionals regularly and sticking to your treatment plan are also important. If you are dissatisfied with these services, express your concerns to your provider and/or find a new provider if your concerns are not dealt with to your satisfaction. Likewise, if your treatment plan is not working for you, you should work with your providers to change it to suit your needs.

Research has shown positive outcomes when significant people in a recovering person’s life receive information about their loved one’s condition, as well as problem-solving and communication skills to reduce stressful interactions.² Because most behavioral health providers might not proactively talk to you about engaging your significant people in your treatment and recovery services, you can initiate this discussion. You can ask to sign a consent form permitting your provider to share whatever types of confidential information you choose with each person you identify. It’s better for your provider to share information verbally in sessions or scheduled phone appointments rather than in writing so your private information does not accidentally get into the wrong hands. If your significant people are offered information and support and included in decisions that affect them, they will be more likely to be cooperative and supportive, rather than inadvertently act in ways that are not helpful to you.

Another helpful tool is keeping a daily mood chart, diary card or journal to help you identify and remember patterns of improvements, setbacks and insights that you can discuss with your treatment providers. Some types of evidence-based therapy, such as cognitive behavioral therapy and dialectical behavior therapy, include these documentation tools to improve outcomes.

Working on your psychiatric disability in a positive way will ultimately lead to a more stable existence and minimize your stress.
IT IS OFTEN VERY DIFFICULT FOR MOTHERS, ESPECIALLY SINGLE PARENTS, TO CARVE OUT TIME FOR THEMSELVES. Young children have continual needs for feeding, dressing, bathing, etc. As your children get older, they may become more self-sufficient at home, but often they need assistance getting to and from activities and friends' houses. When they become teenagers, they may need you even more to consult with them about school, peers, sexuality, career choices and other issues of adolescence. Just as it is important for your mental health and your stress level that you find opportunities to do things with your children, it is also important to sometimes be able to do things by yourself without your children. This allows you to take time to be free of others' demands and think only of your needs. This can be especially important if you have mental health challenges to contend with.

How do you find time to enjoy yourself? Decide how much time you can afford to be away from your family — it might be once or twice a week or once a month.

Schedule time to be alone or with a trusted friend. Find a babysitter if you need to. If you can’t afford a babysitter, ask your friends or relatives to take your children for the day, or find a day when no one is home. You could take turns with another mother, watching her child for one day and having her watch your child on another day. If you can get away, make plans to travel somewhere for the day.

THINGS YOU CAN DO:
Do something that you have always wanted to do but never got around to, such as visiting a museum, seeing a movie or play, shopping at a special place, or hiking in the woods.

Relax at a local coffee shop or have a leisurely lunch at a local restaurant.

Do something good for your body, such as getting a massage, taking a relaxing bubble bath, or going for a swim or a bike ride.
Spending time with your family or your other supporters can be just as important as getting alone time in terms of reducing your stress. Research has shown that people who have strong social support structures (including family, friends and pets, too) experience significantly less stress in their lives. Being with loved ones can make you feel good. Furthermore, once you communicate to them the kinds of things you find helpful, they might be able to offer assistance, insights and ideas in times of stress.

Tips for Creating Quality Time With Your Children:

• Make the time you spend together a priority, and commit to it. As children get older, they will want to spend more time with their friends and they will have more activities in their schedules. Therefore, make sure to schedule family time (such as a family night), and be protective of this time together.

• Make the most out of the time you spend together, even if it is just doing daily tasks. For example, if you have younger children, bath time and bedtime might be important quality time for you to share as a family. If your children are older, the time you spend in the car taking them to activities or to friends’ houses might be a chance to talk and understand their experiences. You could have your child help you cook dinner or shop for food with you, giving you an opportunity to spend time together.
practice using effective communication skills

Quality relationships take work and skill, especially when needs conflict or tempers flare. Disciplining yourself to use the following skills can significantly improve the quality of your relationships and social network:

- Try to really listen and understand others’ feelings and the needs that drive their feelings. Listening can help the people around you want to listen and understand you.
- Learn to pick your battles and make assertive requests rather than be passive, aggressive or passive-aggressive. People do not have a fair chance to meet your needs or understand your feelings if you do not express them. Thinking others should instinctively know and meet your needs is a setup for misunderstanding and disappointment. Also, letting anger or other feelings go unexpressed could increase your stress, and you might eventually express those feelings in ways you might regret.
- Know when you are too angry or frustrated to be effective. Ask to take a break so you can calm down and regroup rather than say words you cannot take back and possibly escalate conflict.
by communicating your feelings and needs, you are observing your personal limits and boundaries. Personal limits have been described in the following way:

Personal limits, or boundaries, tell you where you end and others begin. Limits define who you are, what you believe, how you treat other people, and how you let other people treat you. Like the shell of an egg, limits give you form and protect you. Like the rules of a game, they bring order to your life and help you make decisions that can benefit you. Healthy limits are somewhat flexible, like a soft piece of plastic. You can bend them and they don't break. When your limits are overly flexible however, violations and intrusions can occur. You might take on the feelings and responsibilities of others and lose sight of your own. On the other hand, when your limits are too inflexible, people may view you as cold and distant.8

Once you notice that something another person is doing or not doing is causing you significant distress, or even annoyance, a skillful request can end the problem rather than let tension and resentment build. If the person is not willing or able to honor your request, you may have to employ effective consequences to ensure that you do not have to tolerate behavior that upsets you.

**EFFECTIVE CONSEQUENCES HAVE THE FOLLOWING CHARACTERISTICS, ACCORDING TO THE ANGER CONTROL WORKBOOK9:**

**SPECIFIC** — Your loved one should know what exact behavior will trigger what exact consequence.

**CONSISTENT** — You must monitor that behavior and make the consequence happen every time that exact behavior occurs.

**REASONABLE** — Be fair. Consequences that are too severely punishing will probably add to your loved one’s anger and desire to test you.

**DOABLE** — Ask yourself, “Am I willing and able to make this consequence happen each time I know that this behavior has occurred?”

**DE-ESCALATION SKILLS:**

Sometimes others have difficulty with anger or self-control. If you are feeling frightened by another person’s behavior, it is important to refrain from threatening consequences at that moment because threats can further trigger someone who is upset or agitated. Pay attention to your gut reaction of fear and uneasiness, and tell the person that his or her behavior is upsetting you. Also, try to validate the other person’s feelings and concerns by saying things like, “I can see you are really angry, and I can understand why.”10 If you can stay calm in these difficult situations, it is likely that the behavior of the person you are dealing with will become calmer.
surround yourself with positive support

Having a strong social support network can help you through difficult times. Research has shown that being with supporters who sincerely care for you contributes positively to your emotional well-being.\textsuperscript{11} This is because supportive relationships provide a sense of belonging, an increased sense of self-worth and a feeling of security.\textsuperscript{12}

Who are the people in your social support network? They can be friends, family members, neighbors, co-workers, other mothers, people at your place of worship or peers in recovery from psychiatric disabilities. For example, a new mother might want to get together with another new mother she met at the playground so they can support each other through their mutual parenting experiences.

Note that you usually develop your social support network when you are not experiencing stress. Then when you are experiencing stress, you can turn to your supporters for assistance and comfort.\textsuperscript{13} In the example above, the new mother might be friends with the other mother for a long time, seeing her at play dates and evenings out, but when there is a death in her family, she might lean more heavily on her friend for support in her time of grief.

**HOW DO YOU DEVELOP A STRONG SOCIAL SUPPORT NETWORK?**\textsuperscript{14}

- To have a friend, you need to be a friend. Listen and be there for your friends or family members when they are under stress.
- Stay in contact with people through phone calls, e-mail, social networking, and get-togethers.
- Don’t compete with your friends and family members. Celebrate their accomplishments and successes.
- Remember to thank your family and friends. Say and do thoughtful things to express how important they are to you.
When you are experiencing stress, particularly if it’s related to your psychiatric disability, it might be helpful to join a support group. Support groups are groups of people who share common conditions or experiences, such as medical conditions, addiction, divorce and long-term caregiving. They are often established by nonprofit organizations, hospitals and clinics. Support groups differ from group therapy in that they are not focused on group process, but rather on support for the shared issue. Even though support groups are not group therapy, they can be led by mental health professionals such as nurses, social workers or psychologists. But more commonly, they are self-help groups, facilitated by peers. Support groups can be face-to-face or Internet-based (e.g., mailing lists, bulletin boards, newsgroups, chat rooms, blogs, social media sites).

There are a variety of benefits to joining a support group. They include:

- Emotional release, emotional connection to others and support from others.
- Education about your issue or condition and how to cope with it.
- Less loneliness; knowledge that you are not alone.
- Motivation to deal with your condition in a positive way.
- A clearer understanding of what to expect with your condition.
- Reduction in distress, depression and anxiety.
- Hope.
Like relaxation techniques, stress-reduction exercises are designed to help your body and mind relax through physical activity. While all forms of exercise benefit your physical and mental well-being (see Physical Health and Well-Being module), some types of exercise are particularly helpful for stress relief. Examples are as follows:

**Yoga** — Yoga has many styles and forms. It can be a physically intense experience or a gentler experience. The core components of yoga include poses and breathing. Yoga poses, or postures, are movements and stances designed to increase flexibility, balance and strength. Yoga emphasizes controlled breathing to help control your body and quiet your mind. Traditional yoga practice also involves meditation.19

**Tai Chi** — Tai Chi was developed in ancient China as a form of self-defense. It has developed into a form of exercise that has been described as “meditation in motion” because of its gentle movements, which are designed to promote peacefulness in mind and body. Like yoga, Tai Chi has a variety of postures, styles and levels of intensity. The fluid postures and movements in Tai Chi keep your body in constant motion. Tai Chi also coordinates movement with breathing and focuses on the present.20

**Walking** — Walking can also be a helpful form of exercise. Walking is easy for just about anyone to do and can work into your schedule easily. You can walk with a friend or walk mindfully alone and meditate (as mentioned previously). You can walk briskly or comfortably and gain the benefits of being outdoors and engaging in physical, aerobic activity.21
When most people think about reducing their stress, they think about vacations or recreation. But doing work you love can also be therapeutic and result in stress reduction. For some people, volunteering with others who need help can be very satisfying. Volunteer work can take many forms, such as shelving books at a library, working on a hospital ward, serving at a soup kitchen or putting in time on a political campaign. Think about the issues you are most passionate about, and then see if there is a way to volunteer or work for pay in those areas. Knowing that you are making a difference with the places or people or ideas that mean the most to you can bring you much fulfillment and reduce your stress.
There is a strong connection between being spiritual and experiencing a reduction in stress. Spirituality does not need to be connected to a particular religion, belief system or type of worship, although it can be. Spirituality develops from your connection to others in the world and your individual search for purpose and meaning in life. While spirituality has different meanings to different people, there is no question that research has shown that people who are more spiritual or religious enjoy greater benefits to their health and well-being.

In particular, participation in a spiritual or religious activity tends to relieve stress. One study showed that people with more internal religious orientation (that is, they were more dedicated to God or a higher power) had less reactivity to stress than people who were outwardly motivated regarding religion (that is, those who were interested in religion for meeting people or forming community). Thus, prayer and an internal spiritual life bring with them important benefits, including these:

- Better health.
- Less stress and greater ability to handle stress.
- More positive feeling and less depression.
- Greater psychological well-being.

**HOW CAN YOU DEVELOP AND NURTURE YOUR SPIRITUAL LIFE (OTHER THAN THE COMMON RELIGIOUS PRACTICE OF GOING TO A PLACE OF WORSHIP AND PERFORMING RELIGIOUS RITUALS)?**

- Pray.
- Relax or meditate.
- Write in a journal.
- Read spiritual material.
- Nurture the relationships you have with people, particularly other spiritual people.
- Volunteer in activities that help your community or religious institution.
carve out time for recreation

No matter what ages your children are, it is important for you as a parent to find time for recreational activities. Engaging in recreation allows you to relax and recharge so that when you return to the job of parenting your children, you are refreshed and positive. As one guide on how to cope with stress says, "Nurturing yourself is a necessity, not a luxury."²

HERE IS A LIST OF HOBBIES AND STRESS RELIEVERS YOU CAN EXPLORE:

- Gardening.
- Photography.
- Walking.
- Spending time in nature.
- Taking a long bath.
- Getting a massage.
- Doing puzzles.
- Scrapbooking.
- Knitting.
- Reading.
- Listening to music.
- Going to the movies.
- Traveling.
- Playing in a local sports league.
- Cooking something fun.
n addition to finding hobbies that you enjoy or doing work that is meaningful to you, you can spend time engaged in creative expression. Examples of creative activities you could do are keeping a journal, painting, drawing, playing an instrument, writing music, or writing poetry. These are activities you can do on your own or with other people.

Getting in touch with your artistic side has many benefits. First, it serves as a good distraction from life’s stressors because your attention is fully absorbed in the creative activity. An effect of creating art is beneficial to stress reduction. The effect, called “flow,” is when you are so engaged in the creative process that you experience an almost meditative state, with all the benefits of meditation. Finally, the result of your creative process is usually something you can enjoy and share with others.
ANIMALS PLAY AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN DECREASING STRESS FOR MANY PEOPLE. Animals have a long history of use as healing companions, particularly with people who have psychiatric disabilities. The presence of therapy animals has proved so beneficial to both adults and children with psychiatric disabilities that these pets are now used in many settings, such as schools, prisons, hospitals, hospices and outpatient environments.²¹

Animal-assisted therapy (otherwise known as pet therapy) uses trained animals to help people achieve specific social, emotional and physical goals. Having a pet or visiting with a therapy animal has been shown to lower blood pressure and often improve survival rates for people who have had heart attacks. Some studies say that endorphins (pain-reducing chemicals in the body) are released when a person pets an animal. In addition, pets are often used for rehabilitation to improve fine or gross motor skills and communication. Thus, pet therapy can be of great benefit in providing comfort and in encouraging recovery.²²

You do not need to engage in pet therapy to enjoy the benefits of having an animal as a companion. As long as you are willing to commit to caring for an animal, having a pet can be a great source of comfort to you and your family. If you live in an apartment or rental property, dogs and cats might be prohibited, but you might still enjoy having smaller pets, such as birds, rabbits or guinea pigs. As a person with a psychiatric disability, you might especially appreciate caring for an animal because it might distract you from your stress, depression and anxiety. The affection that you develop for your pet has many psychological benefits that will help you on your road to recovery. Your children might also get a lot of love and joy from the right type of pet.
RELAXING PHYSICALLY WHEN YOU ARE FEELING STRESSED WILL HELP YOUR EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING. While it might sound difficult to relax your body during times of stress, the more you practice relaxation techniques, the easier they will become. These relaxation techniques have been proved to decrease stress symptoms and improve quality of life. Learning relaxation techniques is typically easy. There is little to no cost, and there are relatively few risks involved.

Listed below are some of the benefits to engaging in relaxation exercises:

- Slowing your heart rate and lowering your blood pressure.
- Slowing your breathing rate.
- Increasing your self-awareness and concentration.
- Reducing negative emotions, such as anger and frustration.
- Focusing on what is happening in the moment.

TYPES OF RELAXATION EXERCISES:

PROGRESSIVE MUSCLE RELAXATION — This relaxation technique involves slowly tensing and then relaxing each muscle group, starting with the toes and feet and working up to the neck and head. It is designed to help you focus on the difference between tension and relaxation.

VISUALIZATION AND GUIDED IMAGERY — This relaxation technique has you form mental images that are relaxing. In the visualization, you would try to use as many senses as you could to make the imagery feel as real as possible. For example, you might imagine being at the seashore, hearing the sound of the waves, smelling the salty air, and feeling the warmth of the sand between your toes. Visualization is an imagery technique that you do by yourself, and guided imagery is led by someone familiar with the technique.

AUTOGENIC RELAXATION — Autogenic relaxation involves using imagery and muscle relaxation. One way to do this is to repeat words or suggestions in your mind to help you relax. You might imagine a peaceful place while thinking in a controlled way about relaxing parts of your body and slowing your breathing.

MINDFULNESS MEDITATION — People have been practicing mindfulness meditation for thousands of years. While it has mystical and sacred roots, many people today use the technique as a tool for stress management. That is because it can produce a deep state of relaxation and a greater ability to focus the mind on an experience in the present. The practice of meditation involves focusing your attention on an object, an image, a sensation, a mantra (a calming word, thought or phrase) or your breathing while noticing where your mind goes and bringing it back to your current focus. The goal is to try to observe and describe your thoughts, feelings and sensations without judgment. Mindful breathing should be even and deep with the intention of slowing your breathing and using the diaphragm muscles more efficiently. Also, mindfulness meditation can be as formal or as informal as you want to make it. You can go to classes or centers with trained instructors, or you can practice mindfulness meditation while walking, listening to music or praying.
WHAT IS POSITIVE SELF-TALK? It is just as it sounds — talking to yourself or thinking in a positive way. Research has shown that people’s thinking powerfully affects their feelings and their stress levels. Thus, people who are able to challenge their negative thinking and create positive statements about themselves or things that are happening in their lives are more likely to decrease their stress.

Patterns of self-talk, whether positive or negative, often begin in childhood. The first step in changing any of your negative thinking to positive thinking is to identify your patterns of thinking as they relate to yourself or events going on in your life. For instance, if an activity triggers anger or anxiety, make a note of it. Also, note positive experiences. One way to do this is to jot both positive and negative thoughts down in a journal.

Once you have begun to identify your negative thoughts, you can engage in a method called thought stopping, in which you stop your negative thought mid-stream by saying “STOP” to yourself, either silently or aloud. Another way to change your negative thinking is to replace your negative dialogue with milder wording or with positive thoughts. You can also change negative statements such as “I can’t handle this!” into questions such as “How can I handle this?” Here are some additional tips for changing negative statements to positive self-talk:

- Focus on the shades of gray rather than think in black and white.
- Instead of dwelling on the negative, remember positive things.
- Allow for the possibility of a good outcome rather than assume the worst.
- Open yourself to the idea that people will like you and that things will go well.
- Think with logic and look at the facts rather than think with your emotions.
- Rather than focus on what “should” happen, accept that things might or might not be how you hoped or expected.
- Write down irrational thoughts that are self-defeating, and practice changing them to helpful self-talk.
- Be patient with yourself because positive self-talk takes time to master.
Mindfulness is “the practice of becoming more fully aware of the present moment — non-judgmentally and completely — rather than dwelling in the past or projecting into the future.” The focus of mindfulness is the here and now. Meditation is often seen as an avenue to pursuing mindfulness because during meditation, you are centered on your breathing or on the sensations in your body (the here and now). But you can also achieve mindfulness in daily living by simply keeping your mind on the present moment and quieting your inner self-talk. You can do this when you are gardening, listening to music, writing in a journal or even cleaning.

Mindfulness has been shown to be incredibly helpful in stress reduction. In fact, combining mindfulness with cognitive therapy techniques has led to Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, a therapy program that has been helpful in dealing with anxiety, depression and stress management. It is helpful because when you are mindful, you are less likely to think over things that cause stress or dwell on anxieties about the future. Instead, you just notice your worries and bring your attention back to your present focus.

A recent article in Psychology Today outlines some ways to live in the moment:

- Meditate as much as possible.
- Wear a reminder (such as a rubber band around your wrist), and when you notice it, let it remind you to focus on the present.
- Practice slowing down by noticing the subtle aspects of your experiences.
- Make things new. If you are doing something you have done before, switch it up in small ways.
- When you end up having to wait for something, such as waiting in line or waiting in traffic, rather than get annoyed, use that time to focus on the present.
- Focus on your senses: What is the scent? What are you seeing or hearing?
in this module, we have discussed a variety of ways to maintain your emotional health and well-being. Gradually weaving these kinds of activities into your life, whether you choose meditating, keeping a journal, doing yoga or getting a pet, should make an enormous difference in your stress level. However, remember that you don’t want to stress yourself as you are trying to relieve stress! Pick one or two stress-relieving strategies we discussed to integrate into your schedule rather than overwhelm yourself trying to do too much at once. If you are already using stress-reduction strategies that work for you, then you know how important they can be for your wellness.

The better you manage your stress, the healthier you will be for yourself, your family and your children. As a parent with a psychiatric disability, you likely face many challenges with the interaction of your psychiatric disability and stress. Engaging in these stress-relieving activities is especially important for you so you can parent well and live a healthy life.
homework

List three recreational activities you engage in for yourself.

List three activities you do with your family to spend quality family time together.

Who are all of the people you can think of in your social support network?

Name one new stress-reduction technique that you have learned from this module and that you will try. Examples might be:

- Practicing mindfulness
- Positive self-talk
- Taking time for yourself
- Joining a support group
endnotes


10 Mannion, E. Limit setting under crisis conditions: Responding effectively to violent behavior in a loved one., TEC at the Mental Health Association of Southeastern PA.


44 Mental Health Association of Southeastern Pennsylvania, Parenting Plus Curriculum, Session 2 Handout, Changing Negative Thinking to More Positive Thinking.


