

POSITIVE Parents & Children



How to manage parental stress and fatigue

In the cartoon above, the parents are looking at themselves in the mirror. It's not a pretty sight. Their stress, anxiety, and not wanting to face what they see, makes up the picture. When we look in the mirror, what do we see? Do we resemble these parents? Stress and fatigue go with the job of parenting, but enjoying our kids to the max will depend on how well we manage our tiredness and anxiety. Achieving a balance and restoring well-being may not be as tricky as we think...

What we know about parent fatigue

In 2008, the Parenting Research Centre in Melbourne conducted a community-based survey* of over 1400 parents of young children (0-6 years). The survey found that over 70% of parents reported that tiredness gets in the way of them being the parent they want to be. High levels of fatigue were found to be associated with showing affection, anger and frustration, and lack of involvement in kids' play and learning activities. High levels of fatigue were also associated with poor diet and exercise, ineffective coping strategies, lack of social support and poor sleep quality.

* <http://www.parentingrc.org.au/index.php/impact-of-parental-fatigue-project-detail>

Why did I let myself in for this?

We've all been there...or if we haven't, in all probability we will at some stage. The kids are being feral, the fridge is on the blink, restructure in the workplace is about to happen and the school is requesting an interview for Feral #2...again. No matter how well we plan our week, no matter how organised we think we are, no matter how much work and time we put into our parenting, Murphy's Law says 'if the trolley can go off the rails, it will'. And when it does, there's usually great urgency to get it back on track.

Parenting doesn't come with a manual and no two kids are the same. Put simply, this means that we've got to do the best we know how, but differently, for the sake of each child. Working full or part time whilst simultaneously running a family is a big ask, and the stressors can be huge and constant. We're not robots nor are we super-human (even though our kids might think so). To keep the show on the road, we might need to expand our parenting toolbox and put some additional management strategies in place.

Ways to manage fatigue and stress

Cut some slack – nowhere is it written that we have to be perfect parents. Let's get over the notion that we must somehow be infallible.

Don't do disempowered or defeated - it's too easy to feel that we're fast losing ground and that the situation is out of our control. Take one step at a time. If it's a discipline issue, that's led to other issues, then tackle discipline first for other solutions to follow.

Prioritise exercise – there's no better way to improve your mood than to work out. Exercise is an effective diversion from stress and anxiety. Grab the dog and do that walk. Happy pets have a way of enhancing mental health.

Eat healthy – fast foods, take away, and packaged snacks are 'sometimes' foods. Fresh food and a balanced diet works wonders and is usually cheaper in the long run than packaged meals. Give the body the fuel it needs.

Support team –make a list of family, friends, neighbours...anyone we trust to be with our kids...so that when the plot looks like being comprehensively lost, we can call on someone on our team to step in and give us a much needed break. It may only be half an hour for a walk around the block, or an hour for a coffee, or even a date with ourselves, away from our partner.

Create calm –work towards positive interactions, family discussions, rules, boundaries, shared parental and domestic responsibilities, and a quiet retreat somewhere in the house where any family member can go for time out.

Do family – spend time together as a couple, or as a family. Watch a video, walk together, go shopping together, enjoy activities and interests either separately or together. Find that precious few hours to just chill. Try to keep the extracurricular activities to a minimum. Neither the kids nor us need to live in the car.

Finally, seek advice if needed. Only we know our limits, and we're usually the only one who knows when that limit has been reached. Professional advice is only a phone call away. We don't ever need to feel guilty making the call.